The background of the cover features a woman in a dark green Victorian-style dress with puffed sleeves and a high collar, looking out over a row of white townhouses. The scene is set at sunset, with the sun low on the horizon behind the buildings, casting a warm glow. Several birds are flying in the sky. The woman is wearing white gloves and has her hair styled in a bun.

GEMS
of
GRACE

BERYL'S BLESSING

EDWINA KIERNAN

BERYL'S BLESSING

EDWINA KIERNAN



Copyright © 2021 by Lois McKiernan

Published by Moliant Publishing

www.moliant.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means - for example, electronic, photocopy, recording - without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

ISBN (eBook): 978-1-8382850-3-6

ISBN (Print): 978-1-8382850-8-1

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Hannah Linder

Formatting by StudioMercy.com

Visit the author's website for updates:

EdwinaKiernan.com

Contents

A Note on Spellings

1. Still Life
2. Moving Forward
3. The Announcement
4. Alone
5. Memories
6. Dread and Doubt
7. Wedding Day
8. Flickers and Sparks
9. Questions in the Night
10. Settling In
11. An Invitation
12. Past Times
13. Mrs. Fortescue
14. A Blessing In Disguise
15. Taunted
16. Falling
17. The Man
18. Nowhere To Go
19. The Confession
20. The Confusion
21. The Truth
22. Doomed
23. Resolutions
24. The Letter
25. Stationed
26. Friends
27. Arrangements
28. Search and Rescue
29. Words of Hope
30. Confrontations
31. Something To Live For
32. News from the Front
33. Dark Agony
34. Unanswered Questions
35. Mistaken Identity
36. A New Chapter

Epilogue

What Did You Think?

Reading Group Resources

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Book 1: Ruby's Redemption

Book 2: Pearl's Promise

Coming Soon

A Note on Spellings

PLEASE NOTE:

This novel is set in Regency England, therefore, the spelling used is UK (British) English.

This means, you'll see words like

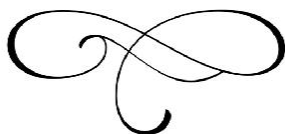
- "pummelled" instead of "pummeled",
- "centre" instead of "center", and
- "licence" instead of "license".

This is intentional, and I hope you find that it gives an authentic flavour to the story.

*For Jesus,
whose love and mercy is the greatest blessing of all*

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

2 Corinthians 12:9



BERYL HAYWOOD DIPPED her brush lightly into her paint box, gritting her teeth as she tried unsuccessfully to ignore the gnawing pain in her hip and force her mind back to the task at hand.

Vacantly, she gazed at the landscape taking form on the surface of her paper. Gentle greens and dulcet lilacs danced across it, their tranquil tones a stark contrast to the anguish agitating her heart.

Five years ago, today.

Five years since her life had been altered irrevocably. Since pure, kind Miss Jenkins had been torn from this world.

Beryl blinked away the memories of her governess's lifeless face. There had always been some animated expression, some quick delight of emotion that radiated from her features. From her very soul.

Until that day.

Slamming the paintbrush down on her working table, Beryl sighed. The brush, as soon as she removed her hand from it, rolled toward the edge of the table. Beryl lunged toward it, but to no avail.

At the sound of the gentle tap caused by the wood of the brush's handle meeting that of the floorboards, Beryl launched herself from her stool, tottering unsteadily as though the solid, gleaming floor beneath her feet were that of a ship, bobbing in a storm. She stifled a gasp as the surge of agony her movement wrought shot through her hip.

Five years since she had become a cripple.

Still, in her waking thoughts and disturbing dreams, every remembrance of that fateful day bombarded her mind.

Worse still was the regret at her part in the decision. If only she hadn't insisted that they travel to the next village to explore the market that day. She would still have her friend, her joy . . . her ability to walk with ease and without pain.

But nothing could change what had happened that day, or the fact that Beryl had survived alone.

Alone.

And so she had remained.

She'd hoped it might have been different upon being sent to Bath. But her aunt was every bit as detached and dispassionate as her parents. As a result, isolation and resignation filled Beryl's days — and

her heart.

Shuffling back toward the stool, Beryl carefully seated herself upon it and snatched up her brush. Dwelling on the past would do nothing to aid her future.

And she would not permit Miss Jenkins's instructions to come to naught.

Yet as Beryl's brush composed more beauty on the page, the pain that zagged through her hip was eclipsed only by that which invaded her heart.



“BERYL!”

Halfway down the hallway, Beryl halted, surprised by the summons.

Her aunt's voice was sharp, as usual. No one could have ever accused Miss Constance Crawford of any tenderness, unless the recipient were a four-legged, furry creature. She seemed to prefer the company of house pets to that of people — even her own relations.

Or, perhaps, *especially* those.

“Yes, Aunt Crawford?” asked Beryl, attempting an air of cheerfulness that didn't even sound convincing to her own ears, as she pondered the significance of the unexpected interaction.

Though Beryl had lived with her aunt for five years now, she could count the number of times they had actually conversed on both hands — just barely. And most had taken place outside of the large, ornately-furnished house in which they resided.

Constance Crawford was a rich widow, with more rooms and money than she knew what to do with. When it had become clear how severely and permanently Beryl's gait had been affected, her parents had sent her away to live with Aunt Crawford in Bath.

They had repeatedly insisted that they were only thinking of what was best for her, though without ever explaining how they had arrived at their solution, nor the reasoning behind it.

But Beryl knew what they were really thinking.

With her out of the way, her parents would be free to focus all their efforts on getting her sister married off to a titled gentleman, especially now that Beryl's own likelihood of making *any* match was practically non-existent.

Bath was a different world compared to her little village of Lindenfell. It had been pleasant enough at first glance, though, the atmosphere within her aunt's grand walls had been decidedly less welcoming than the town itself. The concerts and gatherings which she and her aunt would occasionally attend provided the meagre

semblance of conversation and company that were starkly lacking within the Crawford residence.

Prior to her arrival, Beryl had secretly hoped that she and the aunt whom she had never met would share a closer relationship than the one she had with her parents — a feat which would not have proved difficult to achieve.

But Aunt Crawford had been just as aloof. Perhaps, even more so. All that seemed to light her eyes were her furry companions — dogs and cats to whom she spoke more soothingly and lovingly than she ever had to her own niece.

Even now, after years of sharing meals and attending events together, nearly every attempt that Beryl made to strike up a conversation was met with a frosty silence, or a heavily-lidded glance — if anything at all.

Beryl often wondered why Aunt Crawford had agreed to take her in, given how irksome her existence seemed to be to the woman. She supposed it was some burden of indebtedness Aunt Crawford felt toward Beryl's mother.

Judging by the little Beryl had managed to scrape together over the years, from fragments of whispered statements and judgments, it would seem that Mr. Crawford had not been the intended choice for Aunt Constance, and — somehow — Beryl's mother had stepped in to smooth the fraying family bonds before Beryl's grandfather had disinherited her aunt altogether.

It was a strange thought, Aunt Crawford rebelling against the social expectations of her family of origin. And, for love! Had Aunt Crawford once been warm? Romantic, even? It was almost impossible to imagine. Though she never dared speak of him, Beryl often wondered if the death of her uncle had also dealt a fatal blow to her aunt's feelings and affections. Or, at least, to those which ought to have been directed toward other humans.

And so, Aunt Crawford left Beryl to her own devices, which, in time, had come to suit her rather well. Beryl spent many a solitary day lost in her painting or reading heavy tomes of adventure and intrigue from her late uncle's library.

When she did dare to venture out in the company of her silent aunt, Beryl favoured attending fundraising concerts, provided the dark of evening and the crowds of attendees both worked sufficiently to her advantage in enabling her to remain less likely to be noticed.

She still found it rather unnerving to be seen in public. No matter how much she had tried, her limp could not be disguised, and the first few times she had rejoined society after all that had happened, she had been filled with such self-conscious panic that she'd fled back home at her earliest opportunity, dissolving in a heap of tears on the

way. Even then, her aunt had been like an immovable statue, devoid of any understanding or compassion.

"I have received a letter from your parents." Aunt Crawford's impassive voice dispersed Beryl's unpleasant memories.

"Oh?" Beryl's mind filled with both anticipation and apprehension as it drifted back to the present. Usually, her parents wrote only a few times a year, around special occasions. What could have elicited this sudden communication?

"They are to visit us here. Next month."

"Visit?" Beryl gaped.

She hadn't seen her parents since being sent to Bath. As her mother had mentioned in one of her scarce letters, their time was much too fully occupied to travel back and forth such a distance.

Why it was that they had never invited Beryl to revisit her home instead had never been explained.

"Did they mention their reason for coming?" asked Beryl.

"They are to attend a wedding, I believe. Your mother was not fully clear. All flounce and little fact, as always." Aunt Crawford punctuated her sentence with an impatient roll of her eyes. "However, they are to arrive mid-month." She sighed wearily. "I do not even know how long they intend to stay."

The shake of her aunt's head and the reluctance on her countenance indicated all too well her hope that it would not be for very long.

Beryl nodded, turning the strange news over in her mind. A wedding . . . but who did her parents know in Bath, other than her aunt? Would Beryl be expected — or even invited — to attend it with them? She truly hoped not. Though, even if she could not escape it, at least all eyes would be on the bride and groom. She would merely endeavour to hide amidst the crowd — a skill she had tried her hardest to cultivate in recent years.

Perhaps her parents might bring Beryl back home with them, afterward — for a visit, at least. Maybe even permanently. Eager anticipation mingled with tremulous uncertainty in her heart.

One of Aunt Crawford's dogs yapped, bounding toward their feet.

"Oh, Snowball," Aunt Crawford purred, lifting the fluffy little canine into her arms. For a moment her features grew soft and affectionate. But when her gaze returned to Beryl, indifference returned with unnerving rapidity.

"And this has arrived for you," said Aunt Crawford, handing Beryl a letter before walking away, carrying her puppy like a baby, leaving Beryl silent and alone in the empty hallway.



READY FOR BED, Beryl sank into the chair next to it and opened her Bible, hoping to avoid the all-too-often repeated futility of waiting for sleep that would not come. Better she could make use of her alert consciousness by reading God's word, she reasoned, seeking to mine its depths for trustworthy truths and reassuring revelations.

As she began to read, the deep ache of loneliness in her heart began to ease. She believed this book — believed that it was more than just a book. It was how God had chosen to communicate with the people He had made.

Years earlier, the wisdom and kindness of Miss Amelia Jenkins, her governess, had convinced Beryl of the truth, leading her to give her own heart to God in repentance and faith. Ever since, as Miss Jenkins had encouraged her to do, Beryl drank daily from the delights waiting to be discovered in His word.

Even now, each verse she read was like a quenching refreshment to her thirsty heart, and each passage that spoke of God's sovereignty and authority was a comforting consolation that, perhaps, there truly was some kind of purpose to be found within her suffering. That, someday — somehow — God might even use it for good.

Beryl's eyes darted back to the verse she had just read in chapter twelve of the book of 2 Corinthians. Reading it again with renewed focus, she sucked in a breath.

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Beryl's throat stung as she silently agreed in her heart. Even though the idea of glorying in her infirmities was not something she was prone to do, she could not deny that God's grace really *had* been sufficient for her in all that she had come through.

And that, no matter what was still to come, His strength was all that truly mattered. For, He did not only give her strength — He *was* her strength.

Without Him, she knew that she could do nothing.

"Thank You, God, for Your word, and for the truth contained within it," she prayed aloud. "Help me to trust You — that You have a purpose for my pain, that You can use it for good — for my own, and that of others. Forgive me for the times that I grow melancholy and resentful. Please, Lord, help me to be content. And help me to trust You with all of my heart. May the power of Christ rest upon me, and fill me with Your peace."

As she shifted from the chair into her bed, she longed to ask God for something else, too.

A friend.

But the sinking sensation that always unfurled in her chest upon thinking of it caused her to quickly dismiss the notion.

She reached for the letter that Aunt Crawford had given her in the hallway that afternoon. Smoothing the paper, Beryl read again the lines of sloping words, with their graceful stems and flourishing hooks.

The words conveyed a message every bit as animated as their script.

Pearl was married.

Beryl sighed, mourning the loss of the opportunity to have shared such a happy day with her oldest friend. She had all but lost Miss Pearl Acton — or, Mrs. Pearl Dalton, as she now was — upon being sent to Bath.

They still wrote letters to one another, but it wasn't the same. And as the years had passed, the longer the time that stretched between each note had become.

Their lives had moved in different arcs, and though they would always share a fondness for one another and a deep, bonding faith, their lives were so different now, so far removed from the chattering, giggling ease of companionship they had enjoyed throughout their youth.

And now, though Pearl wrote with such fervent encouragement and relayed her glad news so excitedly, Beryl knew that this new development was destined to result in even longer intervals between their already dwindling correspondences.

Still, even though their spheres of life continued to pull them farther apart, at least Pearl was alive.

It was more than could be said for Miss Jenkins, who had been Beryl's closest companion and most defining influence.

Beryl sighed, remembering the warmth and laughter she had shared with Miss Jenkins. With Pearl.

She had lost them both. One to matrimony and distance, the other to the grave.

Then, her parents had pushed her away.

And her aunt was entirely indifferent to her presence.

She had no one left.

Ask Him, her heart pleaded. *Ask God to give you a new friend.*

Her eyes closed in frustration.

No.

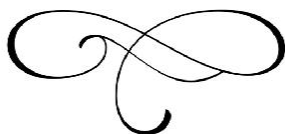
She could not.

She *would* not.

Surely, it would be better to keep her heart closed than to dare hope for a new companion to share it with.

Beryl shook her head, seeking to dismiss the notion.

Why ask for a friend, when she would only have to one day face the inevitability of losing them, too?



“YOU WISHED TO SEE ME, FATHER?”

Frederick Sinclair peered around the edge of the dark, wooden door to his father’s study, his jaw clenched and his mind racing.

It had only been a few months since his return from the war. A return which he had not expected to make.

“Frederick? I said to come in.” Mr. Sinclair’s head tilted at a wary angle as he eyed his son.

Frederick swiftly entered and closed the door, approaching the familiar burgundy leather chair opposite his father’s. He cleared his throat as he sank down onto it. “Forgive me, I did not hear you.”

The images and memories that flashed continuously through Frederick’s mind often seemed more real — more vivid and tangible — than the world and people presently around him. All too often, he would completely miss a remark from his father or a question from his mother, only to be met with that look — that strange blend of sympathy and surprise — when he finally zoned back in to what was going on in his current reality.

“How are you, Son?” Mr. Sinclair’s kind eyes peered at Frederick, full of questions.

“I am well.” Frederick nodded, his unintentional sigh a contradiction to his affirmative answer.

“I know that it has all been rather difficult for you, trying to readjust to life as normal, after all that you have experienced,” said Mr. Sinclair. He looked expectantly at Frederick, clearly awaiting his response.

Frederick drew a deep breath. Life as normal. He had forgotten what that even looked like. He opened his mouth to speak, but scenes of death and destruction pummelled his mind, stifling his voice.

At the sound of Mr. Sinclair clearing his throat, Frederick forced himself to concentrate on the present.

He was back in England, in his father’s study, he reminded himself. He was still alive.

Frederick chewed the inside of his cheek, biting harder and harder until it hurt.

“I have some news,” his father began, in an almost apologetic tone. “It is good news. Good news, indeed.”

Frederick observed his father. If the news were so good, then why did his father look so uncertain of how to break it to him?

Besides, he didn't deserve any good news. Not after what he had done.

"Your mother and I are well aware of what a fine young man you have become, and we have been discussing how we might help you feel more . . . *settled* in your return to English society."

Frederick held his breath, listening. What could possibly make him feel settled ever again?

"We are giving you a house in London. A young man with a bright future must surely prefer the sights and opportunities which are only to be found in the city, rather than a quiet life in the country."

Frederick stiffened, his mind a blur. Bright future? Nothing was bright — in his future, or in his past. The gloom of guilt draped over everything, obscuring all light and hope.

Frederick cleared his throat. "Father, it is not necessary . . . I cannot—"

Mr. Sinclair held up his hand. "We insist, Frederick. You are a respectable young man, now. An officer — a hero, eh? Now that the war is over, it is our desire — our pleasure — to furnish you with the space to flourish in whatever endeavours you now wish to pursue."

Frederick balked inwardly. He was no hero. And he was only an officer because his father had been kind enough to purchase the commission for him, most likely in an attempt to give purpose to Frederick's aimless existence at the time.

His father had seen it clearly — the distracted and gloomy atmosphere that had abruptly taken hold of his younger son. But he hadn't known why. He still didn't. Frederick had made sure of it.

And, he intended to keep it that way.

Frederick cleared his throat. "I appreciate it, Father. Thank you," said Frederick, his mouth dry.

He turned it over in his mind. Removed to London. Living alone. Perhaps it would be for the best.

He wouldn't have to constantly wonder if this would be the day his parents discovered how bloody their son's hands truly were.

Besides, what could he offer his family by staying here? Nothing of any use.

Yes . . . London might be better, after all. He could be alone with his guilt, his family no longer exposed to glimpses of the hopelessness that he tried so desperately to hide.

There would be no need to maintain the façade that all was well. In a home of his own, he could finally peel off his mask of duty. He could hide away from the world if he so wished.

Which, most days, he very much did.

“There is another . . . surprise.” Mr. Sinclair’s voice was almost whimsical.

Frederick looked at his father, whose eyes seemed to twinkle despite his somewhat hesitant demeanour.

“Oh?” Frederick shifted his weight in his chair, trepidation stifling his breath.

“Well, what could any young man beginning a new chapter of his life wish for . . . but a wife?”

Frederick’s heart stuttered. A wife? He must have misheard.

Surely, he had misheard.

“Your mother and I have long hoped to arrange an advantageous match for you, and there is a well-connected family in whom we had a particular interest. We have recently been blessed to settle on excellent terms with the girl’s parents. She is quite a winsome young lady — with a handsome dowry, too. The wedding has been fixed for next month, by special licence. And so you shall have pleasant company to share your new home.”

With each word his father spoke, Frederick grew increasingly tremorous. A wife? Next month? He was still trying to come to terms with surviving the war. Now he was to be responsible not only for his own future, but for a stranger’s, too?

“Frederick?”

Swallowing hard, Frederick met his father’s gaze. His body quivered. All strength deserted his legs.

He wanted to scream, to refuse. But the instinct to obey and please his father was as strong as ever.

Besides, his father was a man of integrity — no manner of protestations would induce him to go back on his word once it had been given.

Wearily, Frederick offered his father a brief nod. “I see,” he said in a strained voice, clearing his throat as he choked on the words.

Mr. Sinclair leaned forward, his expression warm and optimistic. “Big changes, my boy, but *good* changes this time, eh?” He looked hopefully at his son.

“Indeed,” Frederick croaked.

Mr. Sinclair nodded contentedly and rose to pour them each a drink.

Frederick clenched his jaw as he accepted the glass from his father’s hand, striving to conceal his trembling.

“To happier times,” Mr. Sinclair said with a pleasant smile, holding his glass aloft.

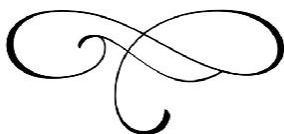
Frederick raised his glass toward his father’s, his own voice a weak shadow in comparison. “Happier times.”

The brandy’s moisture was a welcome relief to his dry mouth and

throat, its burning warmth a familiar comfort. Frederick closed his eyes, willing himself to focus only on the soothing heat that flooded through him from the liquor, and not on the torments of memories and griefs that battled relentlessly to consume him.

Life, somehow, continued to move forward. It would seem that he had no choice but to try to move with it.

Even though you do not deserve a part in it at all, he rebuked himself inwardly.



BERYL SMOOTHED her dress for what seemed like the hundredth time in as many seconds. Peering out the window, she saw an unfamiliar carriage roll into view. Her heart picked up pace. It must be her parents.

She closed her eyes, and for a moment, she was back in their old carriage, contented chattering and pleasant laughter ringing through the air around her, until a neigh of distress had so suddenly silenced the joy.

Beryl opened her eyes and blinked, willing her mind to concentrate on the present.

As her family's new carriage pulled to a halt, she held her breath, eager to catch sight of them.

Her father emerged first, then turned back to aid her mother as she alighted. They both looked so different from how Beryl remembered them. Her heart ached with all-too-familiar hurt and loneliness. They'd practically become strangers since the whole ordeal.

How clearly she could still remember her mother's disappointment five years before. Surely, most women would have rejoiced that their daughter had survived such a dangerous experience. Yet, Mrs. Haywood had only seemed to lament the ruination of her daughter's future prospects.

Years of reflection had given clarity to the worried looks and hopeless shrugs with which her mother had regarded her during the accident's aftermath. Beryl had become a disappointment. A loose end that needed to be clipped out of the tapestry.

Beryl sighed. Five long, lonely years had passed, but still she could remember waking up to the realisation that everything had altered irrevocably. Tucked under her eiderdown, for a moment she'd imagined that it had all been a horrid dream. But each time she'd tried to move, the sharp, hot pain in her hip had reminded her how real it all had been. When her mother had eventually creaked the door open, her pale, glum face had caused Beryl's heart to sink even more.

Her mother had moved toward her, perching lightly at the foot of Beryl's bed, regarding her with a look Beryl had never seen before. One she had hoped she might never see again.

"The doctor has said that you ought to recover . . . although your

ability to walk properly may not return.” Mrs. Haywood had looked intently at her folded hands on her lap as she’d spoken. “It is likely you will have a limp. Though how pronounced, we cannot know at present.”

Beryl closed her eyes as she remembered. She should have just been grateful. It could have been worse. It had been worse for Miss Jenkins, after all. But a limp? Beryl had wondered how she would get around independently, how she would attend balls during the Season if she were not able to dance.

She’d questioned who would ever take interest in . . . a *cripple*.

How little her worries had mattered, though. She’d never dreamed that she would have instead been shunted off to Bath, scarcely entering regular society, and living with an aunt who barely even spoke to her unless it was absolutely necessary for her to do so.

Muffled voices outside drew Beryl’s attention back to the here and now.

Against her better judgment, hope fluttered in her heart. Her parents *had* come all this way to visit . . . perhaps they missed her. Perhaps once they saw her again, they *would* wish to take her back home with them.

As she continued to observe them from the window, her hope faded as quickly as it had stirred.

Perhaps not. After all, five years was a long time. Surely they ought to have missed her sooner?

As Mr. and Mrs. Haywood disappeared out of sight toward the house’s front door, Beryl limped away from the window and into the centre of the room. Should she wait here? Should she rush — as fast as she was able to hobble — to meet them at the front door?

Hesitation filled her. Despite how long she had lived in her aunt’s house, it still didn’t feel like home. It never had.

Nor did she expect that it ever would.

As she stood, still deliberating, the sound of footsteps and voices grew closer and louder. She froze in anticipation as the drawing room door opened.

“Beryl, my dear,” said Mrs. Haywood, managing somehow to sound warm yet appear distant at the same time.

“Mama,” said Beryl, exhaling as she spoke. She moved toward her, not failing to notice how her mother’s gaze moved immediately to Beryl’s unsteady leg and foot, the faint smile that had been forced on her face now painfully absent.

“Papa,” Beryl said, shifting her focus to her father. The smile that he offered seemed more fitting for an acquaintance than a daughter. But at least he was looking at *her* and not her disfigurement.

“Beryl,” said Mr. Haywood, nodding in greeting.

“Where is your aunt?” asked Mrs. Haywood.

“She said she will join us for dinner. I do not quite know what she is engaged in at present.”

Beryl rarely knew what it was, exactly, that her aunt did to occupy her days. Usually, they saw one another only at meal times, eating and drinking in abject silence.

“Shall I ring for tea?” Beryl asked.

“Oh, yes . . . I would love a cup after the journey,” sighed Mrs. Haywood, sinking down into one of the armchairs.

Once they were all seated and had tea in hand, Beryl looked expectantly at each of her parents. “What is it that brings you to Bath? Aunt Crawford mentioned something about a wedding . . . ?”

Mrs. Haywood darted a pointed look at her husband. The two exchanged a slight nod before Mrs. Haywood’s gaze returned to her daughter. She gave Beryl a polite smile and sipped her tea.

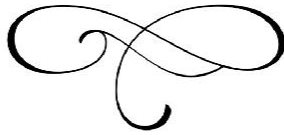
Beryl looked at her father, wondering why her mother was acting so strangely.

But then, *was* she acting odd? Beryl hardly knew, for she struggled to remember her mother’s natural behaviour after so many years apart.

“Ah, well, we have some rather good news to share with you, Beryl.” Mr. Haywood’s eyes almost glinted as he spoke.

Beryl’s heart soared. Perhaps they really *were* going to bring her back home.

“The time has come for you to pack up your things and leave Bath.”



BERYL'S EYES WIDENED. It really *was* true! "Oh, Papa!"

Mr. Haywood nodded as he continued. "Soon you shall be the envy of every other girl your age, with your fashionable new address in London."

Beryl's smiling countenance transformed rapidly into one of serious confusion. "London?"

"Yes. We shall all depart for the capital tomorrow, where you shall be married on Friday, after which you and your new husband shall move directly to a lovely new house in Grosvenor Street."

Beryl froze. Married? On *Friday*? That was a mere three days away. "Husband?" she croaked.

"Yes — is it not splendid? I am sure you will be afforded many more opportunities and diversions than those you have encountered here."

Mrs. Haywood looked at her husband with raised eyebrows and a stern glance. "I do hope you mean no disrespect to my sister, John."

Mr. Haywood turned wearily to his wife. "None at all, my dear."

Beryl stared at her parents in disbelief as they bickered back and forth, as though unaware of her presence. Didn't they realise the magnitude of what they had just told her?

Her mouth dry, her heart racing, Beryl fixed her eyes on her father and stood.

"Papa!"

Mr. and Mrs. Haywood's quarrel drifted into silence.

Beryl stared at them, glancing from one to the other and back in rapid, breathless succession. She lifted her eyebrows and knit them together simultaneously, struggling to find words to express the jumble of questions tumbling through her mind.

Mr. Haywood cleared his throat. "Come, Beryl. Do sit down and drink your tea."

Beryl sank down onto her seat, her heart sinking deeper and deeper.

How could she marry in only three days' time? And to a *stranger*?

Still at a loss for words, she peered over her teacup at her silent parents.

They hadn't wanted her to come home with them after all. Of

course it had been too much to ask — too much even to hope.

In her mind, Beryl remembered herself as a young child, gathering up the fragments of a toy that a visitor to the house had unwittingly stepped upon and broken. She had rushed to her mother, offering up the pieces to her, pleading for help as tears had rolled straight down her cheeks and splashed onto the floor. Her mother's scolding words echoed in Beryl's ears even now. "Oh, Beryl, do not be so stupid. It is *broken* — throw it away! And do stop snivelling. Go and find something useful to attend to."

She remembered clearly the cold blade of betrayal that had pierced her upon hearing her mother's unfeeling response. And how, moments later, Miss Jenkins had found Beryl and wrapped comfort around her with soothing words and a warm embrace. She hadn't scolded Beryl or called her stupid. Miss Jenkins had fixed the toy with a bright smile and cheery encouragement, speaking as she mended the toy of how God restores broken people — binding up their wounds and making them new.

Beryl gazed at her parents.

For most of her life — and, especially the past five years — they hadn't really wanted her.

And now, most likely, her soon-to-be husband wouldn't want her either.

Beryl placed her teacup onto its saucer with such a resounding clink that she examined the delicate china to ensure she had not accidentally chipped it.

"Does he know?" she asked. Her blood thundered in her ears, magnifying yet dulling her voice simultaneously.

Mr. Haywood glanced up at his daughter, his countenance unchanging. "Know?"

"About me, about . . . about my limp."

Her entire body trembled with dreadful anticipation. Who would want her in this condition? Either he knew and did not care — and thus was unlikely to care anything for her at all, or he did not know, and she must soon endure further isolation and rejection.

Either way, it would seem that only more loneliness and anguish lay ahead.

Her father shifted as though experiencing some unseen discomfort. "I did not feel that it was relevant to mention."

Beryl's jaw went slack. "Not relevant to mention? Of course it is relevant! What kind of man wants to marry a *cripple*? A cripple that he does not know! A cripple that he does not even know *is* a cripple!"

Mr. Haywood grimaced. "Beryl, please. Get a hold of yourself. He is a respectable young man from a good family. A second son. His father was seeking a wife on his behalf, and they specifically sought us

out. Your . . . *condition* did not arise during the course of our discussions, but it is no matter. The terms are settled, the contracts have been signed, and it is all in motion now.”

“Sought us out? But, why?” Beryl’s mind was racing. Why would anyone seek out *her*, of all people?

Pride spread across Mrs. Haywood’s face like a peacock unfurling its tail feathers. “Why, they must only wish to be connected with a family of *quality*, I imagine. Indeed, they seem quite affluent themselves — the young man’s father has arranged for a *special* licence.” As she emphasised the penultimate word of her sentence, her eyes glowed.

Beryl gaped. So . . . her parents would throw her away to a stranger, all so they could clutch onto their cherished social status. How little she truly meant to them.

The reality of it all hit her like a heavy blow to the gut.

Mr. Haywood stood, motioning to his wife to follow his lead. “I should like to retire to our guest quarters and rest awhile before dinner.”

“A capital idea, Mr. Haywood.” Beryl’s mother followed him out the door with barely a glance at her daughter on her way past.

Alone in the drawing room, Beryl exhaled forcefully, her head and heart at war.

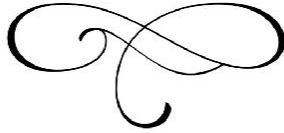
Not only was she to marry a stranger, but whoever he was, even though his family had — for whatever reason — sought hers out, the man had no idea about the condition that had defined her life these past five years. The condition that she yearned to be free from, despite knowing she never could be.

What if he treated her cruelly? What if he mocked and teased her about it, like the children in town often did?

Tears spilled down her cheeks. *Oh Lord, please, give me the grace I need to bear it all . . .*

Miss Jenkins’s face flashed into her mind, along with the sights and sounds of that fateful day.

The day that had changed Beryl’s life forever.



The sudden neigh of one of the horses disrupted the contented chattering and pleasant laughter within the carriage. Alarmed, I peered out into the evening's gloom.

The speeding gig materialised like a phantom on the darkening empty lane.

My stomach lurched, my head growing dizzy.

I had a sense of leaning into the air.

A thud shook us. Miss Jenkins screamed.

My heart raced. The carriage . . . had it really just tilted onto one side? Surely not.

The greenery outside seemed to blur even more. The horses thundered faster down the road. The driver shouted something, but his frantic-sounding words were indecipherable.

I glanced at Miss Jenkins, whose usually cheerful face showed only terror as she looked at me and then out of the window.

It happened again, the leaning sensation. Yet, farther this time.

The horses' hooves pounded rapidly. Glancing to my right, I saw the sky.

And nothing else.

Too much sky.

The wheels at my side of the carriage . . . They had.

They had left the ground.

My heart raced at the speed of the horses as the driver shouted again.

As I grasped for the seat, I realised that I was no longer sitting upon it. I was being tossed through the air, along with my companion, as the carriage turned right over.

Miss Jenkins's scream silenced abruptly as the impact slammed us downward.

A searing pain shot through my hip, yet as I cried out in agony, no sound emerged.

It grew quiet all around us. A strange, eerie kind of quiet.

Then the darkness swept in all around me.



Hot. Too hot.

Was that sobbing I could hear?

Never before had opening my eyes been so painful.

I blinked, seeing only hazy darkness, hearing only a whooshing sound and distant weeping. My breaths pulled in and out swiftly, my throat dry, my forehead damp with sweat.

It hadn't been this warm earlier.

I raised my hand shakily to my forehead to wipe the moisture away, and my eyes began to focus.

I was lying on my side. Most of my body was numb.

I caught sight of my hand as I lowered it from my forehead and froze.

Since when was perspiration red?

I touched my fingers together.

Sticky.

My heart hammered.

Blood.

The carriage. I was in the carriage.

I blinked, my heart racing, my mouth and throat drier than they had ever been.

Pushing myself upward on my arms, a blade of pain shot through my hip. My arms buckled as I cried out from the throbbing that flooded me.

The quiet weeping stilled. I looked up, searching for its source, afraid to move lest another surge of agony consume me.

Miss Jenkins? My stomach flipped. Was that really her?

So much blood.

All over her face, her dress, her hands.

Tears streaked clear rivulets through the dark red blood on her crumpled face as she looked pitifully at me.

It was painful just to breathe now.

"Do not forget all that I have taught you, dear one . . ." Miss Jenkins's voice was a strained whimper, wispy and weak.

"Miss Jenkins. . ." My own voice was barely above a whisper.

Tears sprang to my eyes.

What nightmare was this?

Wake up, Beryl, I begged myself. Wake up!

A soft moan met the painfully silent air.

Blinking away my tears, my gaze returned to Miss Jenkins, whose glazed, open eyes now only stared, unseeing, straight through me.

Averting my eyes immediately, nausea and terror raged in my chest.

No.

No. It could not be.

My lively friend with no trace of life about her? It could not be!

I gagged, retching on air.

Trembling consumed me, and the thick, muggy air seemed to grow even

closer all around me.

"No!" I wailed, shaking violently as weakness and dizziness washed over me.

Closing my eyes as the darkness returned, I knew.

It must be my turn now.



BERYL STOOD in her aunt's drawing room, emerging from the oppressive memories as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks.

Death had not come for her, as it had for her governess.

Why had God allowed Miss Jenkins to be taken that day? She was the only human on earth who had ever truly cared about Beryl — she had been more like family than all of her blood relatives combined.

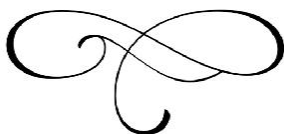
Yet, God had taken her.

And, in so doing, He had allowed Beryl to remain, broken and alone, with only indifferent people occasionally passing in and out of her life.

Indifferent people who seemed to forget — or simply not care — how closely related she was to them.

Now, she was to marry someone who was almost certain to reject her as well.

Why, Lord?



FREDERICK FROZE as he heard footsteps approaching his hired room in the London inn where he and his family were staying in advance of his imminent wedding. Quietly, he tucked the bottle of port he'd been drinking behind a cushion on his chair.

Slowly, the footsteps faded, disappearing in the opposite direction. Frederick sighed in relief. Whoever it was, they were not coming to see him — they had merely been passing by.

Retrieving the bottle of liquor, he reopened it. Swinging it to his lips, he reflected on what lay before him.

Tomorrow, he would be joined in matrimony to a woman whom he had never met — whom he didn't know the first thing about. Besides her name.

Beryl.

It was pleasant enough. And for now, safe enough. It was only a name, after all. But tomorrow, a real and living woman would be represented by it forever.

A woman for whom he would be wholly responsible.

She will hate you for the scoundrel that you are.

Another swig. The burning warmth was a small brush of comfort, as was the thought that he would no longer have to conceal his dependencies from his well-meaning parents.

He sighed, raking a hand across his face. He had tried to view the whole startling development with gratitude. He truly had.

But more deeply rooted than the yearning for a new chance was the crushing knowledge that he did not deserve one.

You are nothing but a pathetic waste of space.

Another swig. He and his father had spent the past week setting up the new property in Grosvenor Street. It was a splendid house.

Too splendid for the likes of him.

You ought to be dead, not gaining a new home in which to live with a lovely new wife.

How could he look after a wife, a home — one day, maybe even children? He could barely look after himself.

In truth, he had little desire to even attempt to do so.

Frederick tried unsuccessfully to blink away his tormenting thoughts, clutching the bottle more tightly and swigging another gulp

from its rapidly diminishing contents.

She deserves so much better.

As time ticked steadily by, Frederick drained more and more of the rich, intoxicating liquor. When the bottle was finally empty, he hid it inside the wardrobe and flopped onto the bed, sinking into a troubled sleep.

Scenes of bloodshed drifted through his dreams. Of Hattersley. Of night roads and smoky winds.

He awoke with a start, trying desperately to shake off the memories of destruction and devastation to which he had contributed.

You will be nothing but a disappointment to her.

He tried to force the thoughts from his mind, but he knew.

He knew it would only be a matter of time until his new wife would regret ever meeting him.



BERYL FASTENED her portmanteau after retrieving her Bible from it, and replaced it next to the other bags and cases she had brought with her to London to begin her new life. It still didn't seem real, the idea that this was her last evening alone.

Tomorrow, she would become Mrs. Frederick Sinclair.

Who was the man with whom she would soon share a home, a name . . . her life?

So many questions circled in her mind. Was he kind? Was he handsome? Was he someone with whom she could hope to have anything in common? Was he a gentleman, or was he a cad? And why had his family sought *her* out, of all people?

Yet one question echoed loudest of all.

How would he react to her limp?

Surely, he would be disappointed to have such a defective wife in the eyes of society.

Apprehension weighed her down. How could she bear to be handed over to a stranger, only for him to reject her as everyone else had?

Dread settled itself in the pit of her stomach. If only she were normal. If only the accident had never happened. If only there were some way to undo what had been done.

She sighed bitterly. Of course her soon-to-be husband would be disappointed with her condition and the limitations that it would bring to their lives. It was inevitable.

She could only hope that his disappointment would not give way to nastiness — that he would not mock her or disregard her, simply because she could not move with the same ease as others.

Sinking down onto a chair, she leaned forward, her head in her hands.

"Oh, Lord . . . must I go through with this?" she whispered aloud. "I am so afraid. Tomorrow, I am to be bound *forever* to someone I do not know, and who does not know me. Oh, Lord, will he like me? Or will *he* reject me, too?"

Tears rolled down her cheeks and she swiped them away with a stiff, quick hand.

"My mother and father have rejected me, and my aunt . . . I would say that she has rejected me, too, except for the fact that she never even took the time to try to have anything to do with me in the first place. And now, a *stranger* is to be my husband. *Husband!* The closest earthly relationship that anyone can have, yet all I know about him is his name! He will be so disappointed with me. Oh, please, help me, Lord!"

Her panic-laced words gave way to frustrated sobs.

How she longed for the comfort that Miss Jenkins would have given her. What wouldn't she give to hear her soothing voice again, imparting encouragement, as she always had. Beryl's heart ached to remember the kind understanding that radiated from her governess's eyes, and the smile that so clearly reflected the lady's inner peace. To think of the scent of violets that would have surrounded her with Miss Jenkins's embrace. Of the truths and assurances that the gentle governess had lived and taught Beryl throughout the years.

Grief squeezed tighter at Beryl's heart as she remembered the last words Miss Jenkins had ever spoken to her.

"Do not forget all that I have taught you, dear one . . ."

Beryl brushed a tear from her eye as she answered silently in her heart.

I will not forget.

No matter what lay ahead, she would not forget the truth and wisdom that Miss Jenkins had taught her. Nor would she ever forget how deeply the woman had cherished her.

As Beryl opened her Bible and turned its pages, she wondered if anyone would ever cherish her again.

For a moment, a glimmer of hope arose in her heart. Why had this stranger sought her out? Could it be that someone really *did* want her, after all?

She swallowed hard as fresh thoughts rushed upon her mind.

Perhaps it wasn't *her* that the man had sought out. Perhaps it was really her dowry. Wasn't that how these things usually worked?

She recalled reading somewhere that most marriages of convenience took place for monetary gain. And, despite her injuries, her father had never indicated an intention to redistribute the money

that had been allocated for her marriage settlement.

A second son — wasn't that how her father had referred to the young man?

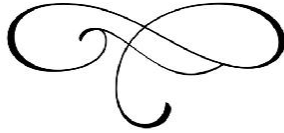
Of course. His elder brother would inherit everything. Surely, her chief attraction was the money that she could offer the younger son.

The whole debacle was nothing more than a financial transaction, with herself as the necessary means to acquire pecuniary security.

She allowed all hope to evaporate from her heart and mind.

It would seem that she was destined to always be passed along as an inconvenient burden, without anyone seeking to know who she really was behind the label of a crippled invalid.

This man — whoever he was — would be no different.



FREDERICK DREW A DEEP, troubled breath as he ascended the steps of the church.

The past week had been a whirlwind as he and his father had completed the furnishing of the new house and procured a new staff. How strange it still was to think that in only a few hours he would travel there with his new wife to begin a daunting new chapter of his life.

It does not have to be daunting, he reminded himself. *Perhaps she will be a pleasant young lady.*

Perhaps, someday, we might even fall in love.

Yet as he advanced toward the altar, with each step forward, the oppressive weight of guilt bore down upon his shoulders.

He didn't deserve love.

He didn't deserve any of this — a wife, a house.

Life.

Drawing yet another deep breath, he came to a stand at the front of the church. His elder brother, Algernon, stood beside him — distant and sullen, as always. Though their father's fortune was hardly a substantial one, Algernon would inherit the lot. Hence, the contracted marriage for Frederick — and the dowry that accompanied it.

Frederick cast a quick glance around the place. His parents sat smiling in the front pew nearest him, and his father nodded encouragingly to him upon catching his eye.

A few strangers occupied the front pew on the other side of the aisle. Two women — one who looked incredibly sour and serious, and a woman with a smug expression who seemed to thrill with delight every time she caught anyone looking in her direction.

His new wife's family. The thought made him stiffen as the reality of the situation flooded his mind.

He was about to unite in permanent solemnity to an absolute stranger.

Guilt clawed at his heart. The people who had perished at his hand would never experience a wedding of their own.

His fingers twitched as he felt a longing in his chest for some liquor. His mouth was dry, his pulse racing. The air in the church seemed heavy and dense.

A creak behind him made him tuck his head down, his eyes widening in fear. An instinctive reaction to potential danger — one of the many foibles he had gained from his time on the battlefield.

Frederick glanced furtively around, hoping that no one had noticed his irrational behaviour. He swiftly regained his posture as he turned to face the back of the church. The thick, wooden doors were opening, and smaller creaks escaped into the air as they continued to move in their giant arc.

The strains of stringed instruments floated through the air as Frederick trembled and blinked, still recovering from his startle. Squeezing his eyes shut, he scolded himself inwardly.

Pull yourself together, man.

Upon opening his eyes, he saw a man with a pleasant smile nod to him as he strode up the aisle. Frederick half-nodded in return before his gaze travelled to the young lady at the man's side.

All he could see from his vantage point was one elegant hand and arm. The smiling man obscured the rest of her.

A few moments later, he caught a brief glimpse of her face, and the orangey-brown curls framing it.

His heart picked up speed. She was prettier than he'd imagined.

The man still blocked most of her from sight, but as Frederick observed them as they drew closer to him, he noticed an unsteadiness in the young lady's gait.

Compassion squeezed his heart. She must have injured herself somehow. He hoped she hadn't tripped on the steps outside and twisted her ankle. He had almost stumbled on them himself, and his boots were much more forgiving than the delicate slips of shoes that ladies wore.

Instantly, the sneering voice in his head mocked him. *Did those people die only so that you might ponder the advantages of your boots?*

Apprehension drained through him. He swallowed hard, steeling his jaw.

He wished he could turn and bolt from the church, from all the people — from the towering commitment that he was here to make.

Yet, in his heart he knew — all too well — that one cannot run from one's own mind, nor the memories that seize it.

The smiling man stepped back a little as he and the young lady reached the place where she would become Frederick's wife.

Finally, she stood before him, unobscured and mere inches away. Brown guarded eyes darted a glance at Frederick, then quickly returned their gaze downward.

As candlelight illuminated his bride's hair, it looked to be the colour of bright, warm flames, with a few darker strands intertwining here and there. The blend was a stunning display.

The lady was indeed a beauty.

As the clergyman began to speak, Frederick stole another glance at his bride, guilt plucking at his mind.

How much better a husband she deserves than a man with blood on his hands.



AFTER THE SHORT CEREMONY, Beryl stood with her hand on her new husband's arm, her mind still swirling with questions and doubts.

She had tried to focus on the positive aspects of the unexpected marriage announcement. She may not know her new husband, but God did. And He was sovereign over all that happened. Perhaps, in time, the stranger to whom she was now irrevocably bound would become a cherished friend.

Perhaps, even more.

Yet even as she tried to convince herself of it, anxiety clamoured within her as she imagined the alternative.

What if they would always be strangers to one another?

Or, if they *did* grow close — what if she lost him, too?

It had been bad enough to lose Miss Jenkins in the carriage accident, and to lose her proximity to Pearl when Beryl had been transplanted to Bath. How much more agonising it would be to lose the friendship of one who had the potential to be closer than anyone. Someone with whom she might foster an even more intimate connection, and whose very presence could, in time, be her daily comfort.

She glanced at him, unable to disregard how handsome he looked. She had feared he might not have been so close to her in age, and that he might even have been unpleasant to behold.

Just as she was about to lower her gaze, his own turned toward her.

Their eyes met.

His lips pulled up into a kind smile, despite remaining rather firmly squeezed shut. Beryl studied his clear, blue eyes, noticing a deep melancholy that pricked her heart to observe.

Nausea twisted in her gut. How much more sombre Frederick might look when he discovered her undisclosed condition. What expression would he wear when he learned that he had unwittingly married a cripple?

Her affliction was not something she could conceal, no matter how hard she tried. It was something that was permanently and prominently on display, and it seemed that she was studied and scrutinised each time she was in the company of anyone else. Anyone

normal.

Prior to the wedding, each side of the family had travelled to London, and it had been agreed that the newlyweds would make their way directly to their new home after the ceremony, foregoing any kind of wedding breakfast or meal with their extended families.

Beryl was rather relieved not to have to face further scrutiny, yet she couldn't help but wonder if her father had suggested such an arrangement in order to avoid answering any questions about her limp himself.

After bidding farewell to their families, Frederick extended his elbow toward Beryl. As she took his arm and started forward with him, worry caused her head to dip as she tried in vain to mask the unsteadiness in her steps.

Frederick glanced at her sideways, slowing his pace.

Beryl's heart hammered. *Please, do not let him ask me now.*

She stole a glance at him, afraid to keep her gaze on him for more than a second lest it seem as though she were inviting the very question that she wished she could avoid forever.

The wind outside was laced with a distinct chill as they emerged from the musty church.

"Our carriage is just over here," said Frederick.

It was the first time he had spoken to Beryl since they'd exchanged their vows, and she instantly took note of the fact that he had referred to the carriage as belonging to both of them — not just himself.

She hoped it might be an indication of a kind, unselfish heart. But, only time would tell.

Beryl nodded as she followed Frederick's lead, trying to move swiftly, yet hobbling all the way.

She drew a sharp breath as she approached the carriage. She still hated travelling in them, though she had been forced by necessity to do so many times since the accident. In her heart, she would much rather walk everywhere, but her injuries did not allow her to cover much distance on foot. At times, she refused to go out at all, simply to avoid the fear and anguish that gripped her each time she clambered inside one.

As Frederick helped her into the chariot, Beryl begged herself to stay calm. But already her throat felt dry and her limbs tremulous as she tried in vain to cast Miss Jenkins's pale face from her mind.

Frederick settled beside her on the seat. As his door slammed shut, Beryl's heart faltered.

She didn't even realise she was holding her breath until Frederick asked her a question.

"It is a pleasant day, despite the wind, is it not?"

Exhaling shakily, Beryl nodded. "Yes, it is quite pleasant, indeed."

She offered a graceful — though slightly awkward — smile to her new spouse.

Though he returned her smile readily, he did not hold her gaze, but looked away swiftly, his jaw clenching and a line furrowing his brow.

As Frederick tapped the roof, Beryl pondered the reason for his evident discomfort. She could only assume it was something to do with her. Or, indeed, her limp.

Surely, he had noticed it during the course of their exit from the church — how could he not?

Soon, they were in motion, the familiar trundle of the wheels forcing further fractures of tormenting memories through Beryl's mind.

Absent-mindedly, she gripped the seat cushion beside her, remembering with an eerie clarity the sensation, all those years ago, of being thrown through the air as the carriage had toppled and tilted until it had overturned.

Frederick turned his head toward her. "Are you well, Miss Hayw —?" He cleared his throat as his cheeks flushed. "Beryl. Are you well?"

Beryl turned her head to look at him. His countenance — troubled though it appeared — was, surprisingly, a comforting distraction from her anxieties. "Yes, quite well. Thank you."

She paused, reflecting momentarily on the realisation that her name was no longer Miss Haywood. Now, and for the rest of her life, she was Mrs. Sinclair.

"And you?" she asked, studying him shyly.

A haunted look flickered in the depths of his eyes, disappearing as quickly as it had arisen. "Quite well, also," he said quietly with a nod, turning his gaze away.

Beryl drew a deep breath.

They had only just married, but already she couldn't shake the sneaking suspicion that her husband was disappointed by her.

As the carriage rumbled steadily onward, the pounding of the horses' hooves echoed the thudding of her dread-filled heart.



Talk to her, you oaf. She is now your wife, after all.

Dead people do not take wives. Who would they have married, had you not cut their lives short?

Forget about yourself for a moment and see to her. She is your responsibility now, after all.

You do not even deserve to have responsibilities after wrenching those

poor, helpless souls from the face of the earth.

Frederick shifted in his seat, willing himself to ignore the diatribe that dominated his mind.

He glanced at Beryl, then gestured vaguely toward the carriage window. "The house in London is very fine. I am sure you will like it."

He cringed inwardly. In truth, he wasn't sure if she would like it or not, given that he didn't know the first thing about the woman.

"I am sure that I will," said Beryl, nodding, an expression of interest on her agreeable face.

Frederick really hadn't expected her to be so pleasant to look at. And her beauty was not merely external — she seemed quiet and gentle. Amiable.

Better than he could ever deserve.

"We should arrive not long before dinner." Frederick wondered if Beryl could hear the thumping of his heart in the amplified silence of the carriage.

"How lovely," she said, glancing up at him with a faltering smile.

Silence enveloped them once again as Frederick struggled to compose what he ought to say next.

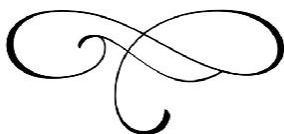
"I expect you shall miss Bath . . . ?" he enquired, chiding himself as soon as the question left his lips for raising a topic that, doubtless, would lead only to further awkwardness.

His new bride's lips drew into a firm, thin line. "I do not know. In truth, I did not have a great deal there that has not accompanied me to London."

Frederick stopped himself from enquiring further, partly due to his fear of saying the wrong thing yet again, and in part because he did not wish to upset his new wife.

Her world had changed irrevocably in a short space of time. No amount of questioning or conversing could hasten her contentment.

A truth with which he was all too familiar, himself.



THE DAYLIGHT WAS FADING STEADILY as the carriage rumbled to a halt in Grosvenor Street.

Beryl offered a silent prayer of gratitude that their journey was over.

Safely over.

As Frederick alighted, Beryl swallowed hard. She had a new abode now. A new life.

With a stranger.

A seemingly quiet and polite gentleman, but a stranger, nonetheless.

She grimaced as she moved to exit the carriage. Sitting for prolonged periods always made her hip stiffen, imbuing agony deep within its fibres.

Frederick helped her shuffle down the carriage steps, concern etched on his face. "I say . . . perhaps we ought to call for the doctor. You seem to have injured yourself quite badly."

Beryl looked up at him, her eyes wide with realisation. So he *had* noticed her limp. But he'd assumed she had merely injured herself?

Of course . . . a temporary injury — that must be why he had not mentioned it until now. Her stomach knotted as she imagined telling him the truth.

"No, thank you, there is no need . . . I . . ."

She looked up into the confused eyes of her new husband. She could not tell him now. Not here, standing in the street, outside their new home.

"I am a little stiff from the journey," she said, shaking her head, a heaviness in her chest from the deception that seemed to have permeated the whole ordeal thus far.

"Let us go inside," said Frederick. "You ought to rest by the fire awhile. Might that help?"

Beryl's heart sank. How kind he was. And how innocent of the knowledge that nothing would ever help.

"Perhaps." She forced a smile. "Thank you."

A liveried servant met them on the street. He led them toward the house, then opened the door for them before politely dipping his head.

Frederick nodded in return as he offered Beryl his arm, and the two made their way — slowly and gingerly — inside. Beryl grimaced, discomfort filling her as she ascended the wide stone steps.

The house was more spacious within than it had first appeared from the street. Fresh flowers greeted Beryl with their scent as she walked past a console table in the hallway which sprang cheerfully from a vase overflowing with fragrant blooms. The sight and aroma were wholly uplifting and soothed her momentarily as she relaxed in their beauty.

“This way,” said Frederick, beckoning Beryl toward a polished wooden door.

Beryl gasped as she followed him into the drawing room. It was beautifully furnished and breathtakingly spacious. Rich golden drapes hung elegantly at the windows, and one of the servants had already prepared a roaring fire.

“Here is a good spot,” said Frederick as he fluffed the pillows of a crimson armchair. He paused, seemingly deep in thought, before dragging the comfortable-looking seat a little closer to the fireside.

He looked expectantly at Beryl. She nodded with a smile as she moved toward the chair and sank down into it, relief flooding her to both rest her hip and avoid further displays of her instability — for the time being, at least.

After looking her over and indicating his satisfaction with a nod, Frederick strode to the door. “I shall have some tea brought,” he said.

Before she could say anything in response, he was gone, and the new Mrs. Sinclair was left alone in her very own drawing room.

Mrs. Sinclair.

So unexpected her father’s announcement had been, and so swiftly had the transference from her old life into her new one taken place that scarcely any of it seemed real.

The warmth of the fire was a welcome comfort. Beryl shuddered as she thought of the carriage ride. Evening had well and truly arrived, and the air had been decidedly chilled for the most recent part of the journey. She placed her hands on her arms and shrugged her shoulders up to her ears.

It hadn’t all been the weather, though.

Still, Beryl was haunted by the memories. Still, she could see the lifeless face of her dear friend in her mind’s eye, could hear the terrified whinnies of the horses. And, sometimes, when she closed her eyes, she could still feel the tilting sensation that had launched her into the air as the carriage had overturned.

The door burst open, startling Beryl back to the present.

Frederick entered, followed by a maid with springy reddish-blond curls framing her face — just like the ones that Beryl’s friend Pearl

always wore.

Beryl sighed inwardly. It had been so long since she'd seen Pearl. She really must reply soon to her most recent letter.

It was almost unbelievable. Never had Beryl imagined when she'd received word of Pearl's marriage that she would soon be responding with the very same news of her own.

Tomorrow, she would reply, informing her old friend of the recent sequence of unexpected events, and conveying to Pearl her new address in order that they might continue their correspondence.

Melancholy settled on Beryl's heart. If only she and Pearl still lived close by one another. But time had pulled them in different directions, as it so often did with those from whom one never expects to be parted.

Frederick moved a small table closer to Beryl's chair, upon which the maid placed a polished wooden tray, arrayed with teacups and saucers, a teapot and a plate of macaroons.

"Some tea?" Frederick asked Beryl, his eyebrows raising hopefully.

"Yes, thank you," said Beryl. She watched the maid curtsy and leave, then looked up at Frederick. He stared back at her, a pleasant look of patient expectation on his face.

"Oh! Forgive me," she said, realisation dawning on her.

Of course. She was the lady of the house now. Therefore, she must be the one to make the tea.

"I do not mind making it if you are feeling too unwell," said Frederick softly.

Beryl glanced at him, her brows slightly raised. "Thank you. But I am quite well."

"I took the liberty of fetching some tea leaves from the cabinet," said Frederick, nodding toward the tea tray.

Relief rushed through Beryl as she peeked inside the teapot. She could remain seated a little while longer, her unstable gait out of sight and mind for the time being. "Thank you."

Frederick stepped closer to the fire and extended his hands toward its heat. "Are you warm enough?" he asked, turning his head briefly toward his new bride.

"Yes, quite comfortable now, thank you," said Beryl as she set about preparing the tea.

It surprised her how little awkwardness she felt, alone in a strange place with a strange man. Even though he *was* now her husband.

"Here you are," she said, raising a teacup and saucer toward him.

"Thank you," Frederick said as he took the tea from her extended hand. His fingers brushed against hers, bringing a gentle blush to his cheeks.

As he settled in the chair opposite Beryl's, Frederick raised the cup

to his lips. "Delicious," he said, an almost wistful tone in his voice.

Beryl studied him silently as he gazed at the flickering firelight, her mind still flustered from his unintentional touch. The more she looked at him, the more handsome he appeared, yet she detected none of the self-assurance or overconfidence that good-looking men were often prone to possess. There was almost a melancholy air about him, a deep sadness — or was it resignation — in his sky-blue eyes. He looked . . .

No. She hated to say the word, unspoken though it was. But . . . he did.

He looked almost *haunted*.

As the silent air of their new abode circulated around them, Beryl wondered for a moment if she had married a man who might someday be able to understand her.

After all, she still struggled with events of the past, still felt she'd lost that depth of emotion one must possess in order for contentment to spark into happiness.

Beryl sipped her tea, observing the droop of her husband's shoulders and the ever-so-slight downturn of his lips as his pensive eyes gazed vacantly at the fire.

Had something happened to Frederick that had stolen his spark, too?



THE BRIGHT ORANGE flames flickered and danced, lulling Frederick into a mesmerised daze.

How was it that he was sitting in his new house, with his new wife, tasting refreshingly full-bodied tea? A mere few months ago he had been surrounded by the smoke and earth of the battlefield, and the lifeless shells of fallen men and faulty paper cartridges.

So many shots. So many muskets and cannons.

How had they *all* missed him?

Robert Barrington's face flashed into his mind. A humble lad, a few years younger than Frederick, with an unrelenting enthusiasm to serve his King and country. Frederick had been right beside him as the flintlock fire had torn through his strong, young flesh, silencing his noble tongue forever. Another soldier had fallen at his other side seconds later.

But not Frederick.

No matter how close he'd advanced to the forefront of the battle, nothing had hit or harmed him. Seemingly, he was doomed to keep wandering the earth, with the knowledge of what he had done as a constant weight on his sagging shoulders.

“Dinner is ready, sir.”

The maid’s voice cut through his grievous reverie. Frederick turned to nod in response, catching sight of Beryl’s inquisitive eyes fixed upon him. She quickly dropped her gaze to her teacup.

If it were any other day, he would withdraw to his room at once. But his first dinner with his new bride lay before him. He could hardly avoid it.

“Shall we?”

Beryl nodded gently as she placed her cup and saucer on the small table beside her chair. As she eased herself to a stand, Frederick noticed a fleeting grimace on her countenance, despite her clear attempt to conceal it.

“Still no better?” he asked. It must have been a harder fall than he’d thought.

An expression flickered onto Beryl’s face that Frederick failed to decipher. She looked at him strangely, then dropped her gaze.

“Perhaps some food will help,” he offered, though not convinced.

Extending his arm toward her, she gingerly placed her hand upon it, leaning more of her weight on him with each alternating step.

Perhaps he should have sent for a doctor, despite her assurances that she had no need of one. She was his wife, now — he had a duty to ensure that she was safe and well.

A fact which terrified him as much as it overwhelmed him.

Upon finally being seated in the dining room, Frederick realised just how hungry he was. He never had a great appetite. Not since the ordeal. But right now, he was hungrier than he could remember being for a very long time.

For a moment, he wondered if it might be good that he had company for the meal tonight. Once in a while, the presence of others succeeded in forcing his mind off everything else.

Most times, however, the thoughts that plagued him rang louder than any conversation and loomed closer than any companion.

As the food was served and the rich, warm scents invaded his senses, Frederick exhaled deeply, wishing that all that hounded him would retreat and leave him in peace for the evening. That, for once, he could delight in the nourishment and refreshment of the sustenance instead of merely consuming the food out of necessity.

Shaking his head slightly in a vain attempt to clear his mind, he looked at Beryl. “Smells good, does it not?” he asked.

Beryl met his gaze. “It smells marvellous,” she replied. The soft smile that accompanied her words made something flicker inside his chest.

He looked down at his meat as he cut a piece off from it. It tasted even better than it smelled, despite the turmoil roiling in his gut.

He studied his new bride for a moment before speaking. "I was thinking . . . Perhaps if your injury is no better by tomorrow we ought to send for a doctor. Simply to ensure that there is no deeper damage done." He sipped the wine, savouring the familiar flavour on his tongue, trying to temper his desire to drain his glass dry. "Where was it that you fell?"

Frederick blinked in surprise as he observed her reaction. He was almost certain she had paled before his eyes.

Beryl cleared her throat delicately. Her cheeks were taut, and her eyes stared at her plate as she spoke in a quiet voice. "I did not fall." She paused. "And I am in no need of a doctor, though I am grateful for your concern."

Her gaze flicked up to his momentarily and, as their eyes met, he sensed there was something more to the story. Something that she seemed unsure about how to put into words.

Surprised at the level of concern that rose within him as he regarded her, Frederick leaned forward slightly. "Miss Hayw—" He shook his head quickly. "Beryl . . . Please do not feel that you must conceal anything from me." He swallowed, his throat dry. "You are my wife now, after all. I wish to help, if I can."

She looked at him, doubt and fear mingling on her face. Her shoulders drooped downward, and her head bowed slightly as she began to speak, her eyes continually roaming from his face, to her plate, to her hands.

"I did not fall. I . . . I have a limp. All of the time. It has been a constant impairment for many years now. And there is no reason to believe . . . that it will ever go away." Her eyes squeezed shut as she shook her head slowly. "I am sorry. My father should have told you and your father. I had no knowledge of what was happening until everything had already been arranged. I did not mean to deceive you in any way. I am sorry."

Before Frederick realised what he was doing, he'd reached his hand across the table and rested it upon one of Beryl's. He pushed aside the questions and surprise that seized him as compassion gripped him even more deeply. "I am sorry that I did not know, for I would have endeavoured to be more accommodating. The steps outside must have aggravated your discomfort a great deal. But, please — you have no reason to be sorry. It is not your fault."

She looked up at him, surprise and gratitude shining in her eyes. "You mean, you do not mind?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Mind?" asked Frederick, his eyebrows slightly raised.

Her gaze fell again. "I do not wish for you to feel cheated by the fact that my father did not make it clear when he was making the

arrangements with your father for the two of us to be married.”

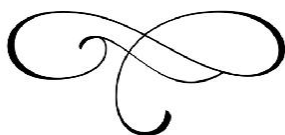
Frederick squeezed her hand. “Do not think such things. It cannot be helped. And there is certainly no reason for you to feel awkward or ashamed.” He paused, his eyes soft as they regarded her. “I am glad that you have told me. At least, now that I am aware, I can take it into consideration moving forward . . . and ensure that you have everything that you need.”

She looked at him again, her eyes shiny and moist. “Thank you,” she said. “I am so grateful for your kindness . . . and understanding.”

He offered her a hopeful smile. “As I said, you are my wife. And I shall endeavour to treat you well, as I vowed.”

As Beryl returned his smile, tormenting thoughts drifted back into his mind.

You did not treat those who died at your hand very well, though, did you?



BERYL'S HEART drummed with relief and gratitude. All her expectations of rejection upon Frederick's discovery of the truth had not come to pass. Indeed — he had even pledged faithful kindness toward her!

She observed the man she had married. Perhaps this new arrangement *was* for the best, after all. He seemed considerate and thoughtful, and he *was* rather pleasant to look upon.

Besides, he had already spoken more to her in half a day than Aunt Crawford had in the past five years.

But what did he think of *her*? He had indicated his intention to look after her, making mention of his vows. Though deeply grateful, she wondered if his affection might ever run deeper — if he would ever come to love her for the person she was inside, and not only look upon her as someone he was now legally bound to care for.

The desserts were brought in. As Frederick yawned and began to eat, another fear crept into Beryl's mind.

What was he expecting the two of them to do after dinner? After all, this was their wedding day, and night was closing in.

Beryl's hand trembled slightly as she picked up her dessert spoon. Frederick did seem a kind and patient man, but she knew so little about how things ought to be done.

She had never been a wife before. And she had never been given any instruction or encouragement from her mother or her aunt in preparation for matrimony.

Neither of them had thought that anyone would want her after the accident. She'd even overheard her mother shortly before she'd been sent away, lamenting to one of her friends that Beryl would never be able to give her parents a grandchild, owing to her limp. She still didn't know if that were true, but it was a conversation she had never forgotten.

Beryl glanced at Frederick. His eyes met hers and he offered a brief smile, though his brow was slightly furrowed, and his cheeks seemed rather tight.

Her heart sank a little. Perhaps, he was only now realising how much it would affect his life that her limp was a permanent affliction instead of a temporary injury. Was he regretting that he had spoken

too soon in offering his compassion?

She tried to catch his eye again, but a heaviness seemed to root his gaze to his plate as he toyed with his dessert spoon.

Perhaps, disappointment *was* settling in, after all.

Beryl reached for another sip of wine, instructing herself to think of something to say that might help her to discern his thoughts more clearly.

Before she could think of anything, he fixed his eyes on her and spoke.

"I must have you speak to the housekeeper tomorrow. She wishes to know our opinions on various aspects of running the house, and I informed her that Mrs. Sinclair would, no doubt, do a much better job than I at such things." His kindness sounded authentic, yet Beryl couldn't help but think that the smile he had added to his words seemed a little forced.

"Of course," said Beryl. "I look forward to meeting her and learning what to do."

Frederick nodded. "She comes highly recommended by my father. I am sure she will aid you well as you settle into your new role."

Her new role. It all truly was so new.

And a role for which she felt deeply unprepared.

"Thank you." Beryl hesitated a moment. "I do hope that I shall live up to your expectations," she said quietly, instantly wishing she could take back her words, owing to how vulnerable they had been.

Frederick kept his eyes on his dessert again for a moment, then slowly set his spoon down on the table. He dipped his head slightly before looking up at Beryl. The candid expression in his own eyes almost took her breath away.

"I must confess to you, Beryl," he began.

Beryl forgot to breathe.

"I am as surprised and overwhelmed as you are with everything that has happened," Frederick continued. "I cannot say that I have any expectations at present." He thought for a moment. "I suppose, my only expectation is that we might work it all out . . . together."

She would have happily captured his expression and displayed it on the wall forever. No one had ever spoken so openly with her, nor looked at her with such honest hope.

"I would like that very much," she said, smiling shyly at him, her heart thrumming with relief and disbelief.

For a brief moment, his countenance relaxed, and the most pleasant smile Beryl had ever seen graced Frederick's face.

Too soon, though, the haunted look returned, and Beryl felt as though an expanse had widened between them.

One that she did not have a clue how to cross.

“Thank you, again. For your compassion,” Beryl said quietly.

Frederick looked at her, seeming to almost look past her initially. He blinked, then fixed his eyes upon hers. “There is no need of that,” he said, offering a weak smile.

Silence stretched through the room.

Frederick’s eyes narrowed slightly as his brows moved downward. “I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for you.”

Beryl drew a deep breath, trying her best to ensure that the tears which had sprung into her eyes would travel no farther and remain unshed. “It is rather difficult.”

She grew silent. For the first time in years — the first time since the accident, at least — someone was reaching past the disability that often clouded their view and relating to *her* instead.

“Moving around can be rather painful,” she continued.

Frederick watched and waited, his eyebrows pushed together by concern.

“Not everyone is kind to me, owing to it all.” She sighed, then sat up straighter. “Still, I am grateful for God and His word,” she said with a nod, offering Frederick a smile.

Frederick shifted in his seat. “Oh?”

Beryl nodded, detecting confusion in Frederick’s voice and manner. “Well, the Bible speaks often of weaknesses and infirmities. And how God’s strength can be displayed best when we have none of our own.”

Frederick’s gaze dropped to his lap. “Is that so?”

Silence filled the dining room. Beryl studied Frederick, noticing his darting eyes and weary posture.

Raising himself to a stand, Frederick’s gaze stayed low. He waited by the edge of the table, extending his arm toward her.

Beryl rose as quickly as she was able, despite the pain that filled her hip upon moving. She shuffled over to him, placing her hand atop his sleeve.

“Allow me to assist you on the staircase. I really do wish I had known about your . . . condition. Please, do let me know what adjustments we ought to make to the house in order to ease things for you,” said Frederick.

Beryl almost forgot to thank him, due to her hammering pulse and racing mind.

Upstairs.

He was leading her upstairs.

Trembling consumed her, though she fought to conceal it.

Surely, not so soon . . .

The journey up the staircase was not a pleasant one, with many stops and starts required in order to allow painful spasms to pass.

As they arrived at the landing, Beryl wished she could run and

hide from Frederick. What must he think of her now?

Frederick held onto her arm, seemingly seeking to ascertain how steady she was. As he squeezed it gently, Beryl summoned the courage to look up at him.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She was suddenly aware of how close his face seemed to be to hers, which made her own seem to tingle all over.

"Yes," said Beryl, almost inhaling the word as she spoke it.

"This way." Frederick motioned with his head as he turned and led her down a candlelit corridor, slowing to a halt at one of the doors.

This was it.

What could she tell him? What would—

"This is your room," he said, turning the door handle and pushing open the door.

"My room?" Beryl stuttered.

Frederick swallowed, dipping his head momentarily.

"Yes," he said. "Mine is right next door."

Frederick pointed at a door toward the left. "I . . . I thought it best — for now, at least — that we . . . That is, there is already so much to which we must adjust . . . I see no need to . . . rush . . . everything . . ."

Beryl noticed the adorable blush that crept into his cheeks as he spoke, accentuating the striking line of his cheekbones in the shimmering candlelight.

Beryl nodded, relief washing over her. "Thank you."

Frederick gave a friendly nod, his eyes darting from Beryl's gaze. "Goodnight, Beryl. And, please — if there is anything at all that you need, do not hesitate to come to me . . ."

Beryl almost smiled. He looked just as bashful as she was. It was rather endearing — and a vast relief.

"Thank you . . . Frederick," she said.

His eyes met hers, surprised and flattered. He offered a warm smile, then bit his lip for a moment before he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

The heat from Frederick's lips seemed to flood right through Beryl as her heart picked up pace.

Now, it was she who dipped her head, her gaze darting all over the place.

Frederick walked a few steps and placed his hand on the door handle of the room right beside her own.

He looked back at her. "Goodnight . . . Mrs. Sinclair."

Beryl's smile faded as she watched him disappear into the room. The door clicked shut, and as she stepped inside her own room, she realised how exhausted she truly was.

As Millie, her new lady's maid, helped her to change from her bridal gown into her nightdress, Beryl reflected on everything, grateful for a peaceful room in which to rest.

As soon as the maid had gone, Beryl eased herself into bed and curled up under the blankets.

It was an answer to prayer that Frederick had not insisted upon any intimacy, yet she had expected that they might have still shared a room. Perhaps having separate rooms was standard practice.

She replayed Frederick's words in her mind. He had said "for now", so perhaps in future they *would* share a room. It was all so confusing. She wished she'd had someone to instruct and guide her about what to expect.

Worry plucked at her mind, as she thought of the kiss goodnight Frederick had given her. Had it been motivated by affection, or by duty?

Most likely, he would never find her agreeable — especially after witnessing the extent of her difficulties on the staircase. Who would be attracted to someone who could barely walk up a flight of stairs without constant agony and instability?

Perhaps she would always be alone, despite being a married woman and finally having the potential to know and be known by a close companion.

She sighed in frustration. She was being ridiculous.

Frederick had shown nothing but compassion and understanding. She ought only to be grateful.

Yet as she closed her eyes, desperate for sleep, a question kept circling in her mind.

Why had Frederick looked so melancholy as he'd called her by her new name?



FREDERICK LAY STRETCHED on his bed, his muscles stiff and tense as he stared at the ceiling without really seeing it.

Instead, his mind's eye roved smoky hillsides and foggy forests.

Cracks of muskets firing and men crying out in pain rang in his ears.

He gripped the blankets tightly, and the tension in his arms almost made them tremble.

So many.

So many men slain, scattered, and slumped like discarded ragdolls all over the fields.

But not him.

Why?

The man whom had deserved most to die . . . had lived. Was living still.

Had even now been blessed with a house of his own, a housekeeping staff . . .

A wife.

A beautiful and gentle woman, who was his — now and forever.

Why?

Why had Barrington died so young, so full of life unlived, so rich with purity and innocence, while Frederick himself — a man with blood on his hands since before he'd ever set foot on a battlefield — had survived?

Hattersley's face flashed into his mind.

The goading smile, the glassy eyes.

They had been so young and foolish. Had thought they could hold their liquor better than they actually could.

That whole summer was a blur of painful memories, of jagged pictures and fractured conversations.

His parents had noticed the change in him, and too many times he'd come close to confessing what he'd done.

Eventually, in hopes of fostering a sense of purpose in Frederick, his father had purchased an officer's commission for him. Frederick had joined the army at the first opportunity, grateful to get away from everything and everyone around him.

And, in truth, trying to gain justice for those he had killed by allowing someone else to take his life.

That is what he'd deserved.

Yet . . . he had survived.

Why?

His thoughts shifted to Beryl.

He pictured her sleeping peacefully in the next room, no doubt her flame-coloured hair framing her delicately beautiful face as she slumbered.

For a split second, something compelled him to go and look — to absorb some of Beryl's calmness and peace, to marvel at how kind life had been to him lately, when all he had wished to do was leave it.

He didn't dare, though.

Frederick swallowed hard.

Poor Beryl. She deserved so much better than him.

If only Frederick's father had known what a monstrous son he had, he never would have arranged a marriage for him.

He would have sent him away somewhere.

Perhaps, even handed him over to a prison.

He should have.

Frederick dragged in a shuddering breath, memories and

accusations swirling in his mind.

Remembering Beryl's confession at dinner, his heart softened. She had truly expected him to be angry about her limp.

In truth, he was, a little.

But not at her.

It seemed to him yet another proof that only the innocent suffer, while the guilty go unpunished.

A tear snaked down his cheek, across his ear and into his pillow.

Why?

And why was it such a comfort to Beryl to read that God uses weakness to show His own strength?

Did God even care?

Ever since that day with Hattersley, Frederick hadn't been sure.

He'd grown up attending church, like most people he knew. But even then he'd had his doubts.

Why did the innocent suffer?

Why did he, the guiltiest man he knew, remain unpunished?

Blessed, even?

Surely, justice ought to demand some kind of atonement for all the wrong and hurt and suffering men were apt to cause.

A reckoning.

There must be. There *would* be.

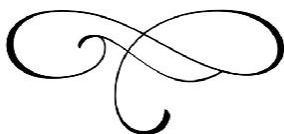
And on that day, he knew — he would be doomed.

He sighed. He was doomed already, despite his longing to be free from the crippling weight of what he had done and the knowledge that there was no way he could ever undo it.

God must surely have turned His back on him, by now. But how then had he been blessed with so much good?

As sleep gradually overcame him, the memories — of smoke and gunfire, of weeping and screaming, of terror and guilt — raced through Frederick's mind. Along with one question, one word, to which he still could find no good answer.

Why?



A WEEK or so after the wedding, Frederick emerged from his room one morning around the same time that Beryl ventured forth from hers. He assisted her down the stairs, which proved easier for both of them than ascending them did.

As Beryl entered the breakfast room and caught sight of the rolls and assortment of fare on the table, she wondered if Frederick had heard her stomach's eager growl.

She watched him, wondering why he did not seem to be in the custom of praying before eating, as she was. She could not recall ever seeing him do so. Perhaps he gave thanks discreetly.

Frederick soon selected his food and proceeded to eat it.

Beryl dipped her head, closed her eyes, and gave silent thanks to God for His provision.

Upon opening her eyes and looking again at Frederick, she noticed he was observing her with a look of curious detachment. He smiled politely before turning his gaze away and reaching for one of the rolls.

"The housekeeper has requested an audience with you after breakfast. She insists upon continuing to learn your preferences, and she wishes to ask you one or two things about some of the rooms. Remember — you have free rein to arrange things however you would like."

Beryl's eyebrows lifted. "Thank you."

Frederick observed her for a moment while chewing a mouthful of food. Upon washing it down with a sip of tea, he looked at her with pleasant interest. "What kind of activities do you enjoy filling your days with?" he asked her.

Beryl's heart sank a little. Here would be the opportunity for him to view her as dull and uninteresting, for both her natural personality and the circumstances of her infirmity made her rather inclined to seek out solitary pursuits. "I enjoy reading," she said. "And painting."

"Painting," Frederick said, sounding pleased. "And that is how you spent your days in Bath?"

Beryl pushed away memories of the loneliness and solitude that she had lived through at Aunt Crawford's house. Despite her ability to enjoy her own company, it would have been nice if *any* of her family had at least taken an interest in spending *some* time with her.

“Yes, I painted quite a lot,” she said. “And I read many novels from the library in my aunt’s house. Occasionally, I would attend a charitable event with my aunt. Though, there were not very many opportunities in Bath. And, sometimes I was unable to go . . . because of the pain,” she added, still rather sheepish about discussing the details of her condition.

“I see,” said Frederick, nodding slowly. “Well, there are *some* books here, and we can indeed acquire many more. There will be *plenty* of charitable events in London to attend. Perhaps, too many from which to choose.” He thought for a moment. “Perhaps, also, we could turn one of the rooms into a space for you to paint.” He paused, looking almost shy. “Would you like that?”

Beryl’s face lit with a smile. “I would love that! Thank you. That is very kind.”

“Did you bring any painting supplies with you or shall I order some to be purchased?”

“I did bring some of my brushes and paints, but I do not have anything on which to use them at present.”

“Then that shall be arranged, also. Would you prefer a room on this floor or upstairs? Which would be easiest for you?”

“I do not know. Perhaps this floor, if there was somewhere that would not be . . . that is, I do not wish to take up a whole room and leave anyone else at a loss.”

Frederick gave a small laugh, breathing through his nose, his closed lips turned upward in an incomplete smile. “There would certainly be no loss for the lady of the house to have a room of her own in which to paint.”

He grinned, the first full, open smile that Beryl had seen him give. What a contrast it was from the heavy expression of sadness that he usually wore.

She prayed that she would see many more.



THE NEXT FEW weeks passed smoothly and uneventfully, with the newlyweds conversing politely at each mealtime and settling into a tentative routine, growing accustomed to the rhythms and surroundings of the new household in which they now found themselves.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Evans, was a short, matronly woman, whom Beryl both admired and slightly feared. She seemed to know everything about running a home, which only served to highlight how little Beryl knew. Still, the woman was less severe than Aunt Crawford’s housekeeper had been, and what Mrs. Evans lacked in

emotion, she made up for in efficiency.

Beryl often wondered what kept Frederick so occupied in his study. He had mentioned various correspondence and household paperwork that demanded his attention, but it must have been a great deal more than she'd imagined given how much of his time it commandeered.

One morning at breakfast, after they had discussed the weather, and painting, and how pleased they both were with the character and capabilities of the servants, Frederick pushed his chair back and stood, fixing his gaze squarely upon her. The hint of a smile played at his lips.

"Come, finish your breakfast — there is something I wish to show you," said Frederick, his eyes soft and kind, though Beryl could still detect a hint of melancholy deep within them.

She stood, wondering what Frederick was talking about. She took his arm as he led her from the room and down the corridor.

He drew them to a stop in the hallway adjacent to the one that housed his study.

"For you," he said kindly, as he opened the door. "I told you a week or two ago that I would arrange a painting room, and I am pleased to say that it is finally furnished with everything you might need."

The first thing Beryl noticed was the light, and how it shone and reflected throughout the small room, owing to the window that was fixed squarely in the centre of the exterior wall.

An easel stood in the middle of the floor, and a tall, thin table beside it held jars and boxes of paints, brushes and other necessary tools.

"Oh, this is perfect," she exhaled. "How wonderful!" She looked at Frederick. "Thank you."

He gave her a gentle smile in response, his eyes gleaming.

Beryl hobbled into the room, running her fingers over the easel and the accoutrements on the table. Joy bubbled within her. A whole room in which to paint. Her *own* room — not cloistered away in her aunt's immaculate yet glacial house, but nestled in a bright, warm room in a home of her own.

She hobbled to the window to look outside. Greenery carpeted the horizon and, closer by, streets stretched before her, full of people and horses — a profusion of colours and moving forms. A captivating sight, at which she could happily gaze for hours.

Beryl heard a rustling of fabric behind her, then Frederick appeared at her side.

"We have quite a spot," he said, almost in a sigh.

Beryl glanced at him, then looked out of the window again. "We truly do. Such magnificent views. And such a perfect location to catch

the changing light.” She grinned as she looked back at him.

Frederick turned his head toward her, a wistful expression on his countenance as he studied her face, his gaze travelling up and down.

The air around them grew dense and weighty. She noticed the pleasing curves of his lips, the strong lines of his jaw. His deep, clear eyes.

He would make a most fitting subject for a painting.

A very fine portrait, indeed.

His eyes fixed on hers, causing her heart to stutter. Surprise seized her as she thought that if he were to lean forward and kiss her, she would in no way object.

His gaze travelled across her face again, resting for a moment on her lips.

Beryl could scarcely breathe.

Clearing his throat, Frederick turned to look out of the window again and pointed to a copse in the centre of their view. “That is the Park,” he said. “It is not too far. Perhaps, we ought . . .” His voice trailed off.

Still somewhat distracted by her previous thoughts, Beryl followed his gaze and peered outside. All she saw were people passing to and fro, on foot and in carriages of all kinds.

She looked back at Frederick, alarmed to notice a slight tremble in his pointing hand.

He lowered it, his breathing fast and shallow.

Beryl had just opened her mouth to ask him if he was all right, when Mrs. Evans appeared in the doorway.

“Beg pardon, ma’am, but I have need of you to finalise a few things for the rest of the week’s dinners and such.”

Frederick twitched and jolted, as though startled by the unexpected voice.

Beryl grew suddenly aware of her need to respond to the housekeeper, yet concern kept her gaze rooted on Frederick.

“Ah, Mrs. Evans,” said Frederick, pulling his posture straight and drawing in a deep breath. “Yes. We are quite finished. My wife would be happy to accompany you now.”

Beryl looked at Mrs. Evans and smiled politely, her thoughts racing.

What had made Frederick act so jittery?

His manner upon looking out of the window and the self-command of his voice as he had spoken to the housekeeper had been indescribably opposite.

How swiftly he’d endeavoured to disguise his discomfort.

Beryl turned back to Frederick, still desperate to ascertain the issue. “I shall see you in a while . . .?”

Holding himself straight and confident, Frederick gave Beryl a swift nod. "Indeed. I shall be in my study." But as he met her gaze, the emotion in his eyes betrayed his composure. What was it that she saw in them — fear? Sorrow?

As Beryl turned to follow Mrs. Evans, she prayed silently, though she could only succeed in distilling her thoughts and emotions into a single phrase of any coherence.

Lord, help him, please . . .



FREDERICK LEANED ALL his weight against the solid oak desk in his study. Sweat streamed in rivulets down his brow.

It came out of nowhere.

Absent-mindedly, he tugged at his collar, desperate to relieve the choking sensation at his throat.

It all happened so quickly.

With a groan, Frederick launched himself toward the crystal decanter on the table next to the window. He poured some of the amber liquid into the empty glass at its side. His hands trembled.

It all seemed fine.

Squeezing his eyes closed as the familiar warm scent filled his airways, he swallowed, thirsty not only for the alcohol, but for the numbing calm he hoped it would eventually bring.

Dead.

He pulled at his collar again, pacing around the small room that had become his private den. His safe place.

He was laughing.

Frederick greedily swallowed down another drink. Still there was no respite from the harrowing memories.

The agony clawed at his heart, squeezed at his throat, wrung out his lungs.

Gone.

His fidgeting gave way to trembling as he sank onto his knees.

Gone. They were all gone.

Yet he remained.

Curling downward, he banged his fists on the cool, hard floor. A guttural cry of anguish filled the air around him.

So many of the other soldiers had perished in the war.

Why hadn't he?

Another drink. Just one more. The others hadn't worked yet.

He reached up and pulled the bottle off the table, forgoing the glass this time. Swigging the jostling liquid straight from the bottle, he discarded all thoughts of measurements and propriety.

Closing his eyes, he savoured the taste, craving the relief that still eluded him.

The relief that, truth be told, he knew would never come.



THE EERIE SOUND stopped Beryl in her tracks. For a moment she wondered if some kind of animal were nearby.

But a heavy sensation in her gut confirmed what she already knew — the sound had come from the direction in which she was walking.

It had come from behind the closed door of Frederick's study, which could only mean . . .

Fear replaced shock as she quickened her pace, her unsteady and swift motion filling her hip with pain.

What had happened? Had he injured himself somehow? Had he received bad news?

Her mind raced through endless possibilities, searching for an answer that would explain the otherworldly howl that still rang in her ears.

Her heart faltered as she approached the door.

She really ought to knock. But something within her had already compelled her hand to seize the door handle and turn it.

Pushing the door open, she moved inside, stopping abruptly as she saw Frederick curled on the floor. A loud gasp escaped her throat.

For a moment she couldn't speak, overcome as she was with shock and dismay.

As Beryl took a step closer, Frederick turned. Her blood seemed to freeze within her veins as she beheld his altered countenance.

He looked so pale. So harrowed.

Frederick pushed himself up on his knees, the look on his face one of unexpected exposure.

With one hand, he reached for the desk and pulled himself to a stand, stumbling backward as his weight shifted from foot to foot.

It was only then that Beryl noticed the lidless decanter he clutched in his other hand.

He dragged the back of his hand across his lips and stared at her, his eyes heavy with a faraway, painful expression.

Beryl swallowed hard, her blood thundering in her ears — the only sound she could hear amidst the deafening, weighty silence engulfing the room.

Beryl could do nothing but gape at Frederick. Though a million thoughts rushed through her mind, she was unable to find a single one to say.

"Forgive me," she eventually croaked, her strained voice barely

above a whisper. "I heard . . . I heard a noise. And I feared that you might have been hurt . . ."

Frederick swallowed. He cleared his throat quietly, his gaze evading her own. "All is quite well, I assure you," he said, offering her the briefest of glances.

The dense, awkward silence that draped around them indicated otherwise.

"Please, you do not have to pretend . . . not to me," said Beryl, her voice soft and gentle.

Frederick's eyes met hers and the fear in them stunned her.

"Pretend?" he croaked.

"You are upset about something . . . you may speak freely to me about it."

His eyes fluttered shut as he shook his head insistently.

As he opened his eyes, he resumed his stiff, formal posture. He strode away from her, replacing the decanter on its table. "I am fine, I assure you," he said, his voice strong and clear, concealing once again the vulnerability she'd noticed in his timbre only a moment before.

Beryl observed him, realisation dawning clearly in her mind.

She wasn't the only injured one in this marriage.

But while her infirmity was plain for all to see, Frederick's affliction was more easily concealed, despite the cracks in his composure she had noticed with each passing day.

Now, seeing him like this served only to ascertain the reality of her growing suspicions.

"If you will excuse me, I have a few matters which I must see to presently," said Frederick, motioning toward the door.

Beryl's heart sank. "Of course."

She turned and shuffled back over the threshold of the room, into the lonely corridor.

She glanced back at Frederick, but he made no effort to meet her gaze before advancing toward her and closing the door.

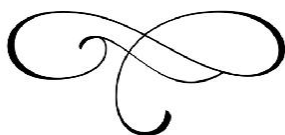
As the finality of the latch's click echoed in her ears, Beryl stood motionless, her heart and mind filled with questions and concern.

Something had indeed stolen Frederick's spark.

But, what?

And would he ever let her get close enough to find out?

Chapter II



THE LIGHT DANCED MERRILY across the surface of the paper as Beryl whisked her brush gently in the jar of water.

It felt so good to paint again. The past few weeks had been a blur of surprise visitations, a sudden wedding, and a secretive husband.

Frederick had visited her in her new painting room after this morning's breakfast to present her with new papers and paints that he'd had brought in from town.

Immediately, she'd detected the hint of sadness in his eyes that he still tried so hard to conceal each day. Why was it there, gripping him and weighing him down, relentlessly?

She hadn't seen him again after their awkward confrontation in his study the previous day. Nor had he appeared for dinner that evening.

Beryl had been half-glad and half-apprehensive to find him at the breakfast table earlier this morning, and though their conversation had been limited, it had not been as uneasy as she'd feared.

He had disappeared shortly after bestowing the painting supplies, and her heart had been surprisingly sad to see him go.

Despite only having met him at their wedding a few weeks ago, she had a fondness toward him that not even the incident in the study had been able to diminish.

He was her husband, after all, so being fond of him was surely a good thing. Yet, she had no idea if the feeling was mutual or not.

As she thought back through their interactions, there *had* been times he had shown compassion and care, yet for most of the short time they had been acquainted he'd seemed . . . distant.

Withdrawn, even.

Beryl dipped her brush in the brown paint, tracing a slender tree branch into one of the corners of her garden scene.

Lord, please . . . help us to find some common ground. Something that will help us to form more of a bond with one another, now that we are man and wife.

A soft knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!" Beryl called out.

She glanced toward the opening door, expecting to see Mrs. Evans with another question for her.

Instead, Frederick appeared in the doorway.

“Frederick!” said Beryl, cheerfully, despite the uncertainty that filled her every time she was near him.

“Good afternoon, Beryl,” he said with a nod.

She nodded in return. “Good afternoon.”

Silence stretched between them for a moment, until Frederick stepped into the room and fixed his gaze on her painting.

“My . . . that is splendid. You have a great talent,” he said. The surprised pleasure that filled his voice warmed Beryl’s heart — and cheeks.

“Do you really think so?” she asked, shaking her head as though attempting to dissolve the blush that coloured her countenance.

“I do,” he said, leaning down to study the scene. “Why, I would not be surprised to see a painting such as this hanging proudly on display somewhere.”

Beryl shifted on her stool, increasingly flustered. “Oh, I should hardly think—”

Frederick’s head turned toward her, still bent down at her level. His eyes locked on hers, and the admiration she saw within them caused her to forget her words.

A tingling sensation overtook her.

His gaze swept over her face and her hair before returning to her eyes. “You are a remarkable young lady, Beryl.” His eyes burned with an earnest solemnity.

Beryl’s heart hammered, overwhelmed by his proximity and sincerity. She opened her mouth, but no words came.

“Remarkable,” he repeated, though much more softly. His gaze moved to her lips, and once again she wondered if he might press his own against hers.

She swallowed, almost choking due to how dry her throat had become.

Melancholy washed over Frederick’s expression, the distance returning to his eyes even as Beryl stared straight into them.

He drew himself upright, a new tension in the air.

For a brief, shining moment there had been no strain, no sadness, no separation. But all of those things had returned with startling rapidity.

Silently, Beryl wondered how she might ever reach across the invisible chasm and gain her husband’s heart.

Frederick cleared his throat and began to pace.

“I have been made aware of something today,” he began, glancing at her. “The Foundling Hospital is holding an event tomorrow evening to raise much-needed funds. I feel that I ought to attend, to show my support.” He paused his pacing and hesitated. “I was wondering if you might like to accompany me. I recall that you mentioned your

previous inclination to attend such events in Bath, when they were available.”

Beryl couldn't help but smile. “Oh, that would be wonderful,” she said, fighting off the inevitable dread that fell upon her at the thought of being in the midst of a crowd of people who knew nothing of her infirmity.

Time and again she'd had to deal with looks of pity, of judgment, and of derision. That was, when people were not simply ignoring her or laughing at her.

Help me, Lord, she pleaded silently.

“Splendid,” said Frederick, though Beryl detected a hint of apprehension in his manner, too. He resumed his pacing. “It is not terribly far from here, though it is too far to walk. We shall have to take the carriage. Though, owing to the hospital's proximity, your discomfort should not last for very long.” He looked at her apologetically, coming to a stand again close by her.

“Thank you. You are so considerate,” Beryl said, touched by his thoughtfulness. Not even her parents had shown any awareness of how much she hated carriages since the accident, nor of how they contributed to her physical pain.

Frederick smiled faintly, his eyes looking deeply into hers. He blinked, giving a slight shake of his head, then resumed his pacing.

“I should say, also — I have arranged for a dressmaker to visit you later today to make any necessary alterations to whichever of your gowns is most appropriate for the occasion. There will not be enough time to have a new dress made, and we will be required to be decked out in our finery.” There was something almost bitter about his tone as he voiced the last few words.

“Oh, indeed. Thank you. I am not accustomed to wearing fashionable clothes. I suppose I lived quite a sheltered life in Bath.” Beryl thought for a moment. “There is one dress that might fare well with a few improvements. Though, I find it hard to believe that any of my gowns could look as grand as those seen in London society,” she said with a smile.

“London society,” Frederick echoed quietly, a hint of scorn in his voice. “In truth, I find no pleasure in the likes of the *ton*. They ought to endure a battlefield or two, make them realise how easy they have it here,” he muttered, a dark expression on his brow.

Beryl gaped. Battlefield. Of course — *that* would explain his behaviour.

In that moment, she vaguely recalled her mother boasting something about an officer's prestige the day her parents had visited Bath, though Beryl hadn't fully taken it in at the time, overwhelmed as she had been by the shock of a sudden, impending marriage.

“You have been to the war?” Beryl asked, unsure whether or not it was wise to address the topic.

Frederick stopped pacing again and looked at her, that same haunted look she had seen so often in the short space of time she had known him. “Yes.” His voice sounded empty.

“I see.” Beryl hesitated. “I cannot imagine how . . . how difficult that must have been for you.”

His jaw clenched as he tore his gaze away from her. He seemed to stare at the floor, though the faraway look in his eyes made Beryl wonder if he even noticed it.

“Mmm,” he hummed. Then, with a startling suddenness, he drew a swift breath and resumed his pacing. “It is done, now. No use dwelling on it.”

There was that voice again — that tone of confidence and formality that concealed everything vulnerable.

Everything real.

Despite his charade of gentlemanly propriety, Beryl could plainly see that he *was* dwelling on it, whether he intended to or not. And she was now convinced that he had been dwelling on it the previous day in his study, as well as all the other times she’d noticed how preoccupied and distant he had appeared.

She remained still and silent. She couldn’t imagine what he must have seen . . . or done.

A thought pressed on her.

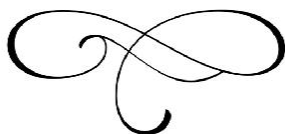
Perhaps Frederick knew what it was to suddenly lose a dear friend, too.

Beryl looked up at him, wondering if she ought to tell him about Miss Jenkins. If her openness might facilitate an unburdening of his own.

As her eyes met his, Frederick nodded, forcing a smile. “I must see to a few matters. Excuse me.”

Beryl nodded graciously. She was sad to see him leave, yet hope stirred within her heart.

Perhaps there might be a way to reach him after all.



FREDERICK MADE a conscious effort to walk more slowly than the speed to which he was accustomed, as Beryl held onto his arm, shuffling along beside him.

Such a pleasant young lady, despite all her difficulties.

As they entered the Foundling Hospital, he leaned his head down close to hers. “Not much farther, now.”

She silently communicated her appreciation with a grateful smile that lit her kind, soft eyes.

Frederick felt a tugging sensation in his chest — one that caught him off guard and fostered a discomfort that made him wish he were back in his study, reaching for his decanter.

But he was here. With his beautiful bride.

Amidst London society.

Frederick drew a deep breath as the familiar trembling overtook him, as it did when he felt hemmed in by people who seemed to walk through life unburdened.

Stringed instruments wafted soothing music through the air as Frederick and Beryl entered a room packed with their fellow patrons. A tall, thin man with a crooked smile ushered them to a pair of empty chairs halfway down the aisle.

Beryl glanced at Frederick as they took their seats, an expression of nervous excitement on her face.

Her pretty face.

How had a match in which he'd had no say resulted in such a winsome arrangement? She was such a gentle woman, in possession of an understated, natural beauty unlike any other he had seen.

A woman who genuinely seemed to care about him.

Heat crept into his cheeks as he recalled their awkward interaction in his study. Such fear and concern had been mingled together in her eyes that he had felt utterly exposed, and rather ashamed.

In times past, he could have — and often *had* — drunk himself to sleep without anyone disturbing him or being any the wiser.

Guilt assailed him — a different guilt from the one he usually carried.

He was a husband now. Responsible for a wife.

A lovely, caring wife.

He was no longer a bachelor, free to wander aimlessly with little consequence.

The time had come, perhaps, to grow up. To mature.

The people you killed will never have any opportunity to grow . . .

Frederick squeezed his eyes shut momentarily, scrambling to hold onto rational thought, desperate to avoid being pummelled by the tormenting truths that played over and over again in his mind.

This is not the time, nor the place to think of the past, he urged himself.

He glanced at Beryl, his thoughts instantly stunned into stillness by the captivated expression she wore as she watched the musicians coax delicate melodies from their instruments.

Something flickered in Frederick's chest as he observed her — something foreign to him.

Something more frightening than his first day on a battlefield.

As though Beryl sensed Frederick's eyes on her, she broke her gaze away from the front of the room and looked up at him. The smile she offered held so many emotions. Shyness. Delight. Hope.

Hope.

Was that what had stirred in his chest only a moment ago? Was it possible that this new avenue of life could actually lead to hope for the future?

You are a murderer. There is no hope for you. How dare you even dream of it?

Frederick's heart sank.

He swallowed hard, tugging at his cravat. He hated these fancy clothes. He felt like a doll, dressed up in layers of attire designed more to project one's class than to accommodate one's comfort.

"It is quite warm, is it not?" a gentle voice whispered beside him.

Frederick turned to face Beryl, his heart aching to be free from all that tormented him.

"Yes," he said, clearing his throat quietly.

"They are wonderful, are they not?" gushed Beryl, her face brightening with a smile that Frederick wished he could return.

"Exquisite," he said, his voice sounding flat even to his own ears.

A flicker of sadness marred Beryl's countenance as she continued to look at Frederick. "You are not enjoying it?"

"No, it is lovely. Truly." He sighed, at a loss to explain. "Forgive me, I . . . I suppose I am still readjusting to civilian life." He gestured with his hands and eyebrows, attempting to dispel the air of solemnity that seemed to have settled upon them.

Beryl's eyes softened with compassion, twisting his heart even more. "Of course . . . It must be so strange. Indeed, I confess I find it all quite strange, myself, after being used to my own company for so

long.”

A sympathetic admiration washed over Frederick. He groaned within himself. How could this be? Not only had a beautiful and kind wife been chosen for him, but one who seemed to understand loneliness and suffering, too.

Could a more perfect choice have been made?

Frederick's gaze swept over Beryl's face, over her fiery hair. He suppressed a surprising urge to reach out and feel her hair between his fingers. “Perhaps we can relearn it together.”

Beryl smiled, her countenance flickering with a delight that seemed to animate every part of her features. “I would like that. Very much” She looked at him shyly.

“As would I.” Frederick looked back at her, unable to stop his growing smile and, for a moment, not even wanting to. He sighed contentedly, turning his attention back to the musicians, mainly to force his thoughts away from the strong desire that filled him to reach out and touch his wife's hair, or shoulder, or hand. “It is a very fine concert.”

Beryl's smile deepened after a moment. “Indeed, it is.” A thoughtful expression danced on her brow. “It is a blessing.”

Frederick grimaced inwardly. He had already been more blessed than someone like him could ever hope to be.

A pleasant smile remained on Beryl's face as she turned back to face the performers.

As the rest of the concert unfolded, Frederick wrestled with conflicting thoughts.

Thoughts of guilt, of hope. Of gratitude, and fear.

Memories of the war, of what he'd been trying to run from for so long now.

Imaginations of the future, of Beryl, of the two of them living fully as man and wife, of having a family of their own, of being happy and content and—

Who do you think you are, daring to imagine such things after all that you have done?

Frederick tried desperately to swat the gloomy, guilty accusations away and enjoy the music, the atmosphere — and the warm, desirable company seated close beside him.

But for each inculpatory barb that he managed to fend off, many more succeeded in piercing him.

He glanced again at Beryl, at her small, gloved hands applauding, at her cheeks and eyes pulled back in a heartfelt smile.

His heart twisted within him.

She deserves so much better.



THE CONCERT AT AN END, Beryl was surprised by how swiftly her nervousness flooded back. For an hour or so, she'd known only peace, content as she'd listened to the elegant melodies played by the skilful musicians.

Now, as she and Frederick wound their way toward the refreshments, she was increasingly tremulous and tired.

Her gaze darted around, too shy to make eye contact with anyone for very long, wondering all the time if they'd already noticed the tilt in her gait as she walked beside Frederick.

How many tongues would be set wagging? How many lips would mock or judge her behind her back?

The thought of it all flushed heat into her cheeks and unrest into her heart.

"Here you are," said Frederick, handing her a glass of wine. Before Beryl could tell him that she didn't wish to drink it, he had downed his own, almost in one large gulp.

Frederick's gaze fell upon her as she gaped at him. He blinked, looking from her, to her full glass, to his empty one.

Beryl offered him an uneasy smile.

"You do not want that?" he asked.

"No, not really . . ."

He extended his hand, and she handed the glass to him. She had just opened her mouth to apologise when he downed her drink in the same manner in which he had gulped back his own.

Beryl couldn't help frowning a little. At times during the concert, he'd appeared more at ease than she had ever seen him before. Now, the haunted expression had returned to his eyes, and he kept tugging absentmindedly at his cravat.

Frederick met her gaze, his jaw twitching. "Do you wish to—"

"Sinclair, old chap!"

They both turned to face the direction from which the voice had come. A man around Frederick's age with smiling blue eyes and sandy hair approached them. Glancing over at Frederick, Beryl noticed her husband's raised eyebrows and open mouth.

"R-Reynolds!" Frederick stuttered, astonishment audible in his voice.

The sandy-haired man clapped Frederick on the back. "How are you doing?"

"I . . . Fine, fine. What a surprise to see you here! Why, last I heard you had settled somewhere up north, near the coast."

"Yes, Scarborough. Quaint place. Lovely. How about you?"

"I have just recently moved to London," said Frederick, still

sounding a little stunned. "With my wife, Beryl," he continued, gesturing toward her.

After introductions were made, Mr. Reynolds shook his head gently as a light chuckle escaped his throat. He looked at Frederick. "Well, now, I seem to recall you indicated, before we returned to England, that you had no intention of taking a wife anytime soon — if ever!" Shifting his gaze to Beryl, Mr. Reynolds smiled kindly. "You must be a special lady indeed to have made him change his mind."

Frederick shifted uncomfortably. Beryl returned Mr. Reynolds's smile, wondering what else the man knew about her husband that she did not.

As the two men chatted further, Beryl glanced around her, taking the opportunity to observe the other people in the room.

Her gaze fell upon a young lady with brown hair who seemed to be in a similar situation to herself. The woman's eyelids drooped with boredom, her gaze scanning the room as the man at her side spoke intently to another man.

The woman's gaze met hers.

Beryl offered her a polite smile and nod.

The woman glanced at the men next to her, then back at Beryl. A forlorn expression worked its way into the woman's features.

A moment later, her countenance transformed.

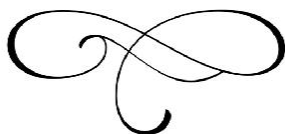
Beryl traced the direction that had played a part in the lady's brightened gaze. A man with black hair laced with silver strands above each ear moved toward the woman.

Beryl watched silently as the man bowed and said something to the now animated lady.

Suddenly, the woman looked straight at Beryl and appeared to say something quietly to the man.

A chill washed over Beryl.

So that was it. The woman had noticed her limp and was actually speaking openly about it to other people.



THE MAN and the young lady strode toward Beryl, whose heart picked up more speed the closer they grew.

Before Beryl could think of how to escape, they were before her.

The man bowed and smiled, his eyebrows lifting pleasantly as he addressed her.

“Ah, Mrs . . . Sinclair, is it not?”

Beryl attempted to swallow the lump in her throat. “Yes.”

“Ma’am, may I introduce Mrs. Fortescue of Grosvenor Square. Mrs. Fortescue, Mrs. Sinclair.”

The young lady dipped her head, her air elegant and pleasant. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Sinclair.”

“And you . . .”

The man bowed once again and took his leave, his posture impeccable and his gaze searching through the crowd as though intending to seek out someone else in need of his assistance.

Beryl frowned. Had the woman not been discussing her limp?

Perhaps she had merely been asking the man to introduce the two of them.

“I hope you do not mind my boldness. I thought the evening was a loss until I saw that you were in a similar predicament as I. So, when I spied Mr. Barton approaching, I was exceedingly glad. Who better to prevail upon to make an introduction than the master of ceremonies himself?”

Beryl relaxed a little. It would seem that Mrs. Fortescue had not been speaking unkindly about her after all.

“How did you find the music this evening?” Mrs. Fortescue’s green eyes squinted as she spoke.

“I found it delightful.”

“Do you live in London?”

“Yes, on Grosvenor Street.”

“Oh? Well, that is not too far from me. But I do not recall any Sinclairs in the area . . .” Mrs. Fortescue looked at her expectantly.

“We have only recently come to live there. Not above a month, in fact.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. My husband and I are only recently married.”

Beryl wondered for a moment how it was that she felt comfortable enough to speak so freely to Mrs. Fortescue when she didn't know the first thing about her.

"Oh, how quaint! My husband and I have been married for five years now."

Beryl swallowed hard.

Five years. The same length of time that she had been a cripple.

"How lovely," Beryl forced herself to say, trying to push the painful memories from her mind.

"Yes, he loves to bring me along to these sorts of functions, but then I am often passed over for the rest of the evening. Which is why I was only too eager to be introduced to you." Mrs. Fortescue eyed Frederick and Mr. Reynolds, then looked back at Beryl. "I believe you may be headed for the same fate," she said, almost wistfully.

Beryl glanced at Frederick, weighing up Mrs. Fortescue's words. No. She didn't think so. After all, it was Mr. Reynolds who had approached Frederick, not the other way around.

In fact, Frederick had seemed all too eager to remain unseen. Of the two of them, it would seem that Beryl had enjoyed the evening the most.

"Are you attending the ball that the Fotheringtons are hosting next week?" asked Mrs. Fortescue.

Beryl hesitated. She hadn't heard of a ball. "Not to my knowledge," she replied.

"What a shame," said Mrs. Fortescue. "They are known for their excellent hosting and generous provisions." She clucked, looking deep in thought. "We shall have to see if there is a way to get you into that set. I am sure you would love it. My, you are only newly arrived . . . I am sure the whole city seems a breathtaking amusement to you."

Beryl smiled, desperately searching for a response. She had not seen a great deal of the city yet, nor did she expect to anytime soon owing to her limitations.

She was really only beginning to get to know her husband.

"It does seem a lovely place," said Beryl politely. "And, indeed, there are many more opportunities to attend charitable events here than there were in Bath."

"Bath?" asked Mrs. Fortescue, her eyes and voice perking up. "You moved here from Bath?"

"I did."

"Tell me, do you know Lady Pinkerton?"

"I cannot say that I do," said Beryl, almost apologetically.

"She is a close personal friend," said Mrs. Fortescue, her expression indicating that such a feat was surely a notable achievement.

"How lovely," said Beryl.

"You must come to call on me," said Mrs. Fortescue.

"Oh, I—" stuttered Beryl.

Wouldn't that be a sight. It was difficult enough to navigate the terrain of her own house, never mind visiting the house of a perfect stranger.

"Sometime next week, perhaps," said Mrs. Fortescue. "You cannot have too many friends in London yet. I should be delighted to be the first."

Beryl smiled, touched by Mrs. Fortescue's kindness, yet unsure what to make of it. Could she really call upon the woman next week? Would Mrs. Fortescue even still want her to once she learned of Beryl's impediment?

"Come, Beryl, we are leaving," a familiar voice said from behind her. She turned, relieved to see no hint of unease on Frederick's countenance.

"Of course," she said. She turned back to her new acquaintance. "It was lovely to meet you, Mrs. Fortescue."

Mrs. Fortescue smiled and nodded, glancing at Frederick. She fixed her gaze back on Beryl just before she turned to rejoin her husband and his friend. "Next week — do not forget!" she called.

Beryl smiled again, not knowing whether to nod or shake her head, and fearing that she had done a mixture of both.

Once they were settled back in their carriage, Beryl turned slightly to face Frederick.

"Did you enjoy speaking with Mr. Reynolds?" she asked.

Frederick drew a deep breath, his eyebrows raising. "I still cannot quite believe that I saw him," he said. "I do not suppose that I expected to see him again. Especially not here."

"Is he well?" asked Beryl, not sure what else to say in response to Frederick's not-quite-answer.

"Yes, he is very well. He is living at the coast in Yorkshire now, and seems to be happy. Thriving, really."

Beryl gazed at her hands.

Happy. Thriving. Could either of those words be used to describe Frederick?

Sadness plucked at her heart.

She knew the answer.

Beryl looked up at Frederick again. "Were you and he close in France?"

Frederick's expression flickered, his jaw firming into a tight line. "It is not always possible to grow very close in a situation like that. Or, at least, one tries not to. But . . . I suppose we were close enough."

"What was it like over there?" asked Beryl.

Frederick looked at her, fear and uncertainty clouding his gaze. "It

is not a part of my life that I wish to revisit," he said flatly, after a moment's pause.

Beryl nodded, then dipped her head.

Once they had reached Grosvenor Street, Frederick helped her inside and up the stairs before planting a good night kiss on her cheek, as had become his custom each evening.

Tonight, however, he did not linger in the hallway to talk further. Instead, he quietly excused himself before disappearing swiftly into his room.

Beryl sat down at her dressing table, smiling at Millie as the maid entered. She was glad at present for how quiet Millie was prone to be, as her thoughts were fully occupied with memories of the evening and concerns about Frederick.

At least he had spoken to her a little about the war — more than she had expected. Yet, it was clear that he did not find it easy or pleasant to discuss.

She could only imagine why.

Mrs. Fortescue's face flashed back into her mind, along with the lady's invitation for Beryl to call upon her the next week.

What was to be done about that?

As Millie pulled the pins out of her hair, Beryl couldn't help but think that she was glad to have met Mrs. Fortescue. It had been so long since she'd had a friend — a true friend.

And she missed it.

Could Mrs. Fortescue ever be as true a friend as Miss Jenkins or Pearl had been, though? There was a difference in the woman's manner — a polite reserve, as though an invisible wall surrounded her, keeping others from getting too close.

Yet, she *had* sought Beryl out, and had indicated an intention to help her find friendship and connections in London, which was more than Beryl's aunt had done for her in Bath.

Fear gripped her as she imagined a friendship with Mrs. Fortescue. All her close friends had been torn from her.

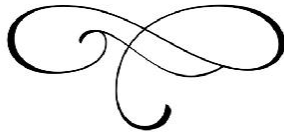
If she *were* to build a friendship with Mrs. Fortescue, the same thing was bound to happen.

"There we are, ma'am," said Millie, smiling at Beryl before taking her leave.

Beryl stared at herself in the mirror, willing herself to calm down. There would be time enough to think of Mrs. Fortescue later.

Tomorrow, Beryl would have a different challenge to navigate.

Frederick's parents were coming for dinner.



“SHALL WE EAT?” asked Frederick.

Beryl’s nervousness returned with full force.

Before today, she had only briefly met Frederick’s parents at the wedding. They had seemed amiable enough from what little interaction she’d had with them.

Now, they were at Grosvenor Street to have dinner with herself and Frederick, and even though the moments since their arrival had been pleasant, Beryl couldn’t shake the sense that something was going to go dreadfully wrong.

She was, at least, glad to be seated again. She couldn’t tell if they’d noticed her limp when she’d greeted them upon their arrival, or as the four of them had made their way to the dining room.

If they had, they were being polite about it.

If they hadn’t, surely it would not be long until they did.

Please don’t let them ask about it, Beryl prayed silently.

She observed Frederick as he and his father spoke of the mutual acquaintance with whom his parents were staying while they were in London.

He did it with them, too. They might not be able to notice how staunchly he tried to conceal the melancholy that seized him, but Beryl could.

“ . . . and of course, your lovely new wife.”

Beryl smiled at Mr. Sinclair, wishing she had been paying attention enough to have heard the beginning of his sentence.

“How do you find London, my dear?” he asked, his warm eyes crinkling at the corners.

“It is very nice,” said Beryl, immediately scolding herself for using so weak a descriptor. “This house is lovely, and the views that we have, in my painting room especially, are beautiful.”

“Ah, you have a painting room! Splendid. I am sure that was one of the many accomplishments that Miss Jenkins instilled in you — am I right?”

Beryl almost choked on her food.

She looked at Mr. Sinclair with wide, blinking eyes. “Miss Jenkins? You . . . You knew Miss Jenkins?”

“Indeed, her father and I were old chums. She was a splendid

young lady.” He paused, melancholy creasing his brow. “I was very saddened to hear of her death a few years back. She was so young, so . . . special.”

Beryl’s eyes misted over. How lovely it was to hear someone else speak lovely truths about her dearest friend. “Yes . . . She was truly a wonderful governess.”

Mr. Sinclair gazed wistfully at Beryl. “I must admit, my dear, that Miss Jenkins was the reason that Eugenia and I sought you out . . . Isn’t that right, my dear?” he asked, turning to look at his wife.

Mrs. Sinclair smiled and nodded, looking first at her husband, and then at Beryl.

Beryl’s heart thudded. “She was?”

Mr. Sinclair nodded. “We knew that the girls who had grown up under her fine influence and tutelage would become very special young ladies indeed.” He glanced at Frederick, an expression of parental pity and fondness deeply embedded in his features. “Just right for our special boy.” He raised his wine glass in the air, his smile deepening as he turned his gaze back upon Beryl. “I believe we were right, if I do say so myself.”

Beryl hoped she wasn’t blushing. “You are too kind, Mr. Sinclair. Though your esteem for Miss Jenkins is well-deserved. She was remarkable.”

“Indeed. And speaking of remarkable, did you happen to see the . . .”

Beryl’s thoughts drowned out the rest of Mr. Sinclair’s words, which had been directed toward Frederick once again.

Her mother had assumed that Beryl had been sought out because of their family’s status. But that was not the case.

It was because of Miss Jenkins that Beryl had been chosen for Frederick.

Grief squeezed Beryl’s heart. If only Miss Jenkins could visit. If only she could see her young charge now grown and in the station of a wife, running her own home and growing each day in her faith in God.

Yes. Miss Jenkins had taught her well. And Beryl intended to honour her dear friend’s efforts — and memory — by living out the wisdom she had gleaned from those happy years spent under her wing.

As the dinner conversation grew more inclusive, Beryl found that she was quite at ease in Frederick’s parents’ presence — a startling difference from the atmosphere that surrounded her own family.

Not that *they* had any intentions of visiting.

As the evening wore on, Beryl stole the occasional glance at her husband, grateful that, though he could never meet Miss Jenkins in

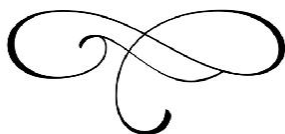
person, there was at least a link between his family and Beryl's beloved governess.

Hope stirred in her heart as she noticed Frederick's frequent glances toward her.

On one occasion, they exchanged a hopeful smile as their eyes met across the table.

Beryl tried to suppress a smile as she lifted her dessert spoon. It was a blessing that the Sinclairs had sought her out. If they hadn't, she would never have known the handsome man seated close by her.

The handsome man who just happened to be her husband.



LATER THAT WEEK, Frederick drew a deep breath as he knocked on the door to Beryl's painting room.

"Come in," called Beryl from within. Frederick's heart warmed. How rapidly her sweet voice had become dear to him.

The past month or so had been lovely, if he were being honest with himself. Beryl's presence was calm and comforting, and he found himself more and more eager to see her and to spend time with her.

He stepped inside the room, his breath catching in his throat as he saw her dabbing at her landscape, an expression of pure enjoyment and focus on her pretty face.

She turned to face him, disarming him with her smile. He briefly offered one of his own before shifting his gaze to her painting, trying to dispel a desire to embrace her.

"My, my," said Frederick. "I was right . . . you truly *do* have a gift. I believe that is one of the finest paintings I have ever seen!"

Beryl's cheeks pinked, gratitude shining from her eyes as she studied him.

"Truly," he continued. "And you really ought to display them somewhere. Perhaps, even sell them."

She shook her head, her bright hair shimmering and glinting in the light.

Frederick stared. The woman was captivating.

"I cannot imagine that anyone would want to buy one. Not when there are so many other artists — *real* artists — whom they could support," said Beryl.

"Well, I believe they would happily support your work," said Frederick. "And you *are* a real artist. Look at it — you have done a magnificent job. It is a brilliant piece."

Beryl studied the painting, her keen gaze searching its every stroke.

"I know what you could do," Frederick said after a moment, snapping his fingers. "You could sell it and use a portion of your earnings to support the Foundling Hospital, or whichever charitable organisation you wished."

Frederick hoped that he would remember for the rest of his life the expression that appeared on Beryl's face. He could think of no words

to describe how lovely and pure it was.

"Do you really think so?" she asked.

"I do," he said. "And if you wish, I shall do what I can to help you do exactly that."

"Thank you," she said shyly, her eyebrows lifting slightly.

Something within him longed to reach out and stroke her hair, stroke her cheek, hold her chin between his thumb and forefinger.

But as soon as he thought of it, a knife seemed to pierce him.

How dare you even think of being happy?

The voice in his head taunted him for what seemed to be the hundredth time that day.

Look at you, daring to think that you can move on. Leaving those people you killed in the dust.

Can they reach out and touch someone? Can they build a connection with someone?

They are gone from this earth.

And it is all because of you.

Frederick swallowed hard, overwhelmed with despair.

"Frederick?" asked Beryl, a slight frown replacing her happiness.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

More lies.

Lie upon lie upon lie.

The truth will come out one day. And then what?

You shall be alone again.

How dare you even think that you could be free from the past and all that you have done?

Weariness settled around Frederick's shoulders. "I have some paperwork I ought to attend to . . . Excuse me," he said, groaning inwardly at Beryl's expression as he turned and left.

As he shuffled down the corridor, a thought struck him that halted him right where he was.

How different she had looked when he had been leaving the room in despair, compared with the joy and gratitude that had filled her countenance upon hearing his encouragement.

His breath sounded loud to his ears as realisation seized him.

It wasn't just him anymore.

Beryl not only depended on him, but she was actually affected by him, too. His moods had a correlation upon her own. His grief blanketed sorrow upon her, too.

Frederick sighed, leaning against the wall.

"I do not want this," he whispered. "I do not want her to be unhappy because of me."

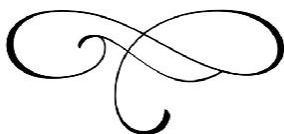
How could anyone be happy around you after all that you have done?

Frederick rubbed his forehead, longing to be free from the taunting thoughts.

All you are good for is bringing death, destruction, and despair.

And that is all you will bring her.

Wearily he resumed trudging toward his office, reaching, once inside it, for the almost empty glass decanter.



BERYL HUMMED HAPPILY as she put the finishing touches on her ensemble for the evening.

It was almost time for she and Frederick to leave for the charitable event they would attend at the Hanover Square Rooms.

Despite how distant Frederick had seemed at dinner the previous evening, and the fact that he had seemed a little distracted at breakfast that morning, Beryl was looking forward to spending more time with him.

She had never been to the Hanover Rooms before, and curiosity gripped her as she imagined how grand they might look.

A gentle knock at the door quickened her heart.

She hobbled toward the sound after casting one last glance in the mirror. Her new dark green dress paired well with her fiery hair, and she was surprised to find that, deep down, she hoped that Frederick would be pleased with how she looked.

As she swung the door open and saw him standing in the hallway, joy pricked her heart.

He looked splendid in his evening attire. And as his eyes met hers, the expression shining deep within them took her breath away.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

Frederick extended his arm, and Beryl placed her hand upon it.

"You look wonderful," he said, his expression almost melancholy.

Beryl dipped her head and smiled as they made their way outside.

Once the carriage was on its way, she turned to Frederick and caught him already looking at her. His gaze darted away a little before meeting hers again.

"Are you looking forward to this evening?" she asked.

He sighed, the kind of sigh that communicated a willingness to seize an opportunity to relax. "Yes, very much." He paused. "And I believe I shall be the envy of every man present," he said, his lips curling up gently in a vulnerable smile.

Beryl blushed. She paused. "Perhaps it is I who shall be the envy of all the ladies," she replied quietly.

He looked at her more intently.

Time seemed to stop.

Something new and intense filled the air between them. Beryl's heart raced so speedily that she felt a little dizzy.

Frederick stirred, causing Beryl to wonder what might transpire.

He leaned toward her, ever so slightly, and after a moment of intense silence he dropped his gaze and reached for her hand.

Gathering her fingers in his, he squeezed them gently.

Beryl looked at him searchingly, wishing she could read his mind.

After a few minutes, when she realised that Frederick had no intention of withdrawing his hand, Beryl looked up at him and smiled — the deepest smile she had given in years.

He looked at her, his eyes vulnerable and soft. "You know, Beryl. I truly am blessed that you are my wife." He shifted a little. "We have not known each other for very long, and we still have so much to learn about one another . . . but I truly am glad to have the opportunity."

Beryl smiled again. "As am I," she said.

The journey to Hanover Square was not a particularly long one, and they arrived sooner than Beryl would have liked.

It had been so special to hear Frederick's heartfelt confession, and to feel safe and cherished as his hand had grasped hers.

Even though Beryl had been looking forward to the event all day, she suddenly wished that they were at home — seated by the fire with some tea — that they might talk, sharing their deepest thoughts and feelings with one another.

Now, they would be swept up in a crowd, able only to look at one another and smile across the bustle and buzz.

The Hanover Square Rooms were every bit as grand inside as they appeared from the outside, and as Beryl surveyed the room and the other attendees, she noted Mrs. Fortescue deep in conversation with a resplendently dressed older lady.

Beryl glanced about for Mr. Reynolds, wondering if he were present, and how Frederick might react at the sight of him again. After their previous encounter, he had been a little quieter than usual. She was sure that their interaction had brought back unpleasant memories for Frederick. Perhaps for Mr. Reynolds, too, despite his jovial demeanour.

After being ushered to their seats, Beryl grimaced as she sat down.

"Are you all right?" Frederick asked.

"Yes, just a little stiff from the carriage," she said.

The look of sympathy with which Frederick regarded her melted her heart.

How was it that she had been blessed not only with a husband who willingly spent time with her, but with one who was so sympathetic toward her sufferings and limitations?

As the music began to play, she reminisced about some of Frederick's recent gestures. She thought of the room he had set up for her to paint in, his encouragement about her paintings, his care toward her infirmity and how best to manage it, and the thoughtfulness he had shown by ordering in more books and asking the cook to prepare a special meal one evening featuring some of Beryl's favourite foods. Each had been so special, and indicated what a kind-hearted soul he truly was.

But Beryl's heart ached as she thought of his lack of interest and understanding any time she mentioned the Bible. And she remembered all too well the haunting look that had come upon his face when she had told him that God's strength was made perfect in human weakness.

She glanced up at him, praying silently that God would open his eyes and heart to want to know more about Him, and that Frederick would turn to Him for the comfort and redemption that only God could give.

The strains of music filled the spacious atmosphere around them as the evening progressed, and Beryl's heart soared each time she and Frederick exchanged a glance or a smile.

As much as being out in public unnerved her, she relished being by Frederick's side. She was proud to be his wife. She loved how protected and valued he made her feel, just by being himself.

As the evening wore on, though, she noticed that he seemed more and more distracted. Her joy faltered as she wondered if, perhaps, she might be enjoying his company more than he was enjoying hers.

The concert at an end, they milled about the chattering crowd, with Frederick once again availing himself of the refreshments, and Beryl again declining them.

"It was a wonderful performance, was it not?" she asked him.

Frederick placed his empty glass on a passing tray, turning to look at her with a blank expression on his face. "Wonderful, yes," he repeated, his mind evidently elsewhere.

Disappointment echoed in Beryl's heart. What was this melancholy that seemed to appear from nowhere and drag Frederick's vitality into the shadows?

"Mrs. Sinclair!"

Beryl turned to see Mrs. Fortescue approaching, a determined stride in her steps and an amused urgency on her countenance.

"Good evening, Mrs. Fortescue," said Beryl, curtsying as best she could.

"Come, I wish for you to meet Mrs. Halford. She has acquaintances in Bath, you know, and I do wonder if you might have any mutual connections."

Before Beryl could respond, Mrs. Fortescue had grasped her by the wrist and started tugging her away from Frederick.

Beryl lurched forward, stretching her foot out abruptly to steady herself.

Pain shot through her leg, her hip socket, her lower back. "Ah!"

Mrs. Fortescue relinquished her grip, and strong hands encircled Beryl's waist. She turned to see Frederick's face right next to her own, concern furrowing his brow above his wide, alert eyes.

"Are you all right?" he breathed, still holding onto her.

"Yes," said Beryl, trying to conceal her grimace.

"You are not."

"I am fine, truly." She shook her head slightly. "It will be fine in a moment."

Frederick released her, his hands still extended for a moment, as though he feared she might be too unsteady on her feet.

Beryl straightened up as best she could.

"I do apologise, Mrs. Sinclair — I did not intend for you to trip . . ." Mrs. Fortescue said, disbelief and confusion evident on her face.

"It is all right. Truly," said Beryl.

Her cheeks burned.

All she wanted to do was go home.

As though he'd read her mind, Frederick seized Beryl's hand and squeezed it. "Perhaps we ought to return home now."

Beryl looked at him, embarrassment flooding her. She glanced at Mrs. Fortescue, whose friends had gathered behind her to witness the debacle.

Beryl locked eyes with Frederick. She nodded.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Fortescue, but we must take our leave now," said Beryl, turning once again toward her new acquaintance.

"I see. Very well. I do hope you are not too badly affected by the . . . *mishap*," she said, her voice a little clipped.

Beryl's heart sank. Surely, the whole event had put an end to whatever friendship may have been set to blossom between herself and Mrs. Fortescue.

She looked back at Frederick, who slipped his arm around her waist. "Come. You ought to rest."

His touch was safe and comforting. Beryl observed him from the corner of her eye as he requested that their carriage be readied. She had never been more grateful for his compassion and kindness.

"I feel so silly," she whispered.

Frederick looked at her with genuine surprise. "Why?"

"It seems such a small matter. It ought not to have brought our evening to an early end, surely."

“It is not a small matter if it caused you pain.”

Fond gratitude surged within Beryl’s heart. Truly, Frederick only grew more admirable the more time she spent with him.

Silently, she offered a heartfelt prayer, thanking God for the husband He had given her.

Frederick ushered Beryl out into the hallway. A frigid chill swept across Beryl’s shoulders, moving her to shudder.

“Here,” said Frederick, assisting her to slip on her pelisse, which one of the footmen had just retrieved.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.

He smiled back, his eyes filled with warm kindness.

Other people intent on leaving brushed past them with surprising frequency. Frederick clasped Beryl’s elbow and guided her backward a little, out of their way.

She looked up at him. “Aside from the incident, it was quite a pleasant evening.”

“Yes,” said Frederick. “Made much more pleasant by your company.”

Beryl’s eyes crinkled as she smiled, dipping her head bashfully. Upon looking back up at Frederick, she noticed a contentment in his eyes that was not usually present.

He looked at her, silently communicating a fond regard that made her heart flutter.

“I do truly enjoy your company, too, Frederick,” she said quietly.

“Your carriage is ready, sir,” came a voice beside them.

Frederick smiled at Beryl as he moved to escort her outside.

The steps were more painful to navigate than they had been earlier, due to the fresh aggravation to Beryl’s hip. She was glad, though a little self-conscious, to be able to cling so tightly to Frederick as he helped her traverse them.

Finally, they reached the street. Relieved once again to be on even ground, Beryl squeezed Frederick’s arm before releasing it. “Thank you.” She dipped her head, melancholy tugging at her heart. “I do wish that I did not have need of it, but I do truly appreciate your help.”

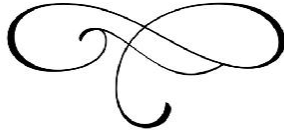
Frederick looked at her without saying anything for a moment, then leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

A thrill shot through her. In that instant, she felt truly cherished.

A question stirred in her heart. Could Frederick be falling in love with her?

There was one thing she knew very clearly . . .

She was falling in love with him.



PEOPLE PASSED by them every few seconds as Frederick and Beryl stood on the footpath beside the carriage.

Frederick's heart warmed from the sensation of Beryl's silky forehead against his lips. He could not say he was truly sorry that they were leaving so early, for it only meant that he would have more time to spend alone with his wife.

His heart picked up speed at the thought.

There was no denying it — he was increasingly drawn to her, despite his inner turmoil.

That evening, as he had subtly observed her delight and contentment, something had cried out within him to be grateful for the present and to look to the future — and to earnestly endeavour not to think of the past.

"Let us go home and have some tea together," said Frederick. "What do you say?"

"I would like that very much," said Beryl. Every smile she gave weakened his defences.

"Good. And perhaps you can tell me mo—"

As his eyes fixed on a man standing farther down the pavement, Frederick's whole world seemed to lurch as though he were falling.

"Frederick?" Beryl's voice sounded distant.

It cannot be.

Frederick stared silently, gaping and blinking as he tried desperately to focus more clearly on the man's features in the dim light.

"Frederick? What is the matter?" Beryl's voice was louder now, though still muffled by the rushing of Frederick's blood through his ears.

The man looked up. Looked directly at him.

Recognition altered the man's features.

His unmistakable features.

"Oh!"

It took Frederick a moment to realise that the weak cry had issued from his own lips.

He staggered backward, as though desperate to avoid some imminent threat stretching out before him.

The man held his gaze a moment longer, then turned and sauntered away, casting a fleeting glance behind him after a few strides.

Frederick's heart thundered, his mind a whirring blur.

It was him. It *was*.

Hatters.

Here.

"Frederick, please!" shrieked Beryl, alarm filling her voice. "Please tell me — what is the matter?"

He hadn't seen Hatters since, since . . .

Frederick squeezed his eyes shut, a torrent of painful memories flooding over him like waves of a troubled sea.

Something hard struck his knees.

The ground. He had sunk to the ground.

If only it would open up and swallow him.

If only it had done so before that day . . .

Frederick could hardly breathe. Dots clouded his vision, his head pounding, his lungs gripped by some invisible vice.

Hatters. In the flesh.

Anger kindled within him.

How was it that he and Hatters were here, dressed in finery, enjoying life and the arts and pleasant company?

Why had he *ever* listened to the man?

For a moment, a desperate urge to pursue Hatters flooded every fibre of Frederick's being.

He ought to. He ought to chase him down and beat some answers out of him.

Why hadn't it affected Hatters the way it had levelled Frederick?

He'd been laughing.

They both had.

It had come out of nowhere.

"Mr. Sinclair? Shall I help you into your carriage, sir, or would you like for me to fetch a doctor to see you?"

The unfamiliar male voice was full of gentle concern.

Frederick opened his eyes. A middle-aged man bent down, his face level with Frederick's own. Beryl stood just behind the man, her hand on her cheek, her frame hunched with worry.

Seeing Beryl changed something in Frederick.

He'd been drowning, but now it was as though his head had finally ascended above the stormy water's surface.

Come to your senses, man, he scolded himself. *You have a wife now. You must not leave her unprotected in the midst of a stupor!*

"Beryl . . ."

"Frederick?" She moved toward him, her face flickering with pain.

The man remained silent beside them, watching and waiting.

Frederick hung his head, his breathing still uneven. Everything inside him wanted to weep.

“Can you stand, sir?”

Frederick looked at the man. There was nothing but gentle kindness in his gaze. No judgment. No impatience.

If he knew who you really were, he would leave you to rot.

Frederick nodded breathlessly.

The stranger reached out his arms and hooked them underneath Frederick’s, pulling him to a stand with surprising ease.

“Thank you,” said Frederick, his voice a mere breath.

“What happened?” asked Beryl, her eyes brimming with concern.

Frederick searched for the words to explain his actions, but none came. He shook his head, waving his hands in the air.

“Do you wish to see a doctor, sir?” the stranger asked.

“No, no,” Frederick said, his voice only a little stronger. He waved his hands and shook his head once again.

“Then, permit me to help you along to the carriage, sir.”

Before Frederick could respond, the stranger’s strong grip encircled each of his elbows. The man’s arm stretched across Frederick’s back, steadying him like a strong barrier. Slowly and gently, he ushered Frederick toward the carriage.

Sudden panic seized Frederick and he turned, looking around for his wife. “Beryl?”

“I am here,” came the gentle voice he had grown to love.

Love!

How could someone like you ever dare to love or be loved?

Just wait. She will hate you, as you deserve.

Despite the accusations raging in his head, Frederick turned, a measure of relief filling him to see Beryl’s flame-coloured hair and dark, compassionate eyes.

The stranger helped Frederick into the carriage, then Beryl, before striding forward into the night.

“Frederick? Are you all right? You look so pale!” Beryl’s eyes were wide with alarm.

For a hint of a moment, her delicate scent soothed his heightened senses.

Then, the carriage jolted into motion, sending another surge of shock through Frederick’s body. He gripped the carriage seat, shuffling slightly. He was so weak he thought he might fall forward, right off the seat, if he didn’t hold onto it. Frederick willed himself to remain upright. To maintain the strength he needed just to sit there. It was exhausting.

“I—” he said, vaguely aware that Beryl had spoken to him.

“What happened?” she asked.

He looked at her, breathing fast, his heart vibrating so violently that he feared it might leap out of his chest.

“It is no matter,” he said, his voice weak and wispy.

Beryl frowned. “No matter? Frederick! You fell to the ground!”
Worry and sorrow clouded her features.

Hatters’s face flashed back into Frederick’s mind.

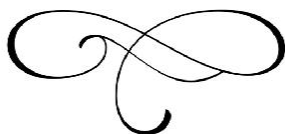
He couldn’t tell Beryl. She would only hate him.

Yet as he observed her troubled expression, compassion mingled with his terror. He had to tell her *something*. Somehow reassure her that all was well.

He closed his eyes.

But, nothing was well. Nothing had ever been well since that day.

And he knew nothing would ever be well again.



“FREDERICK?”

As he opened his eyes, the look on Beryl’s face grieved him deeply. It was a searching look. Questioning. The expression one might have if they are wondering whether or not they can *really* trust the person they ought to be able to trust the most.

“Forgive me,” said Frederick, still panting. “I saw someone. Someone I knew long ago. I was not expecting to and . . .” His words trailed off as he shook his head. “I was not prepared for it.”

Understanding altered Beryl’s features. “Someone from the war?” she asked. The urgency of concern was absent from her voice, and gentleness had taken its place.

Frederick stared at her, not wanting to explain. Not wanting to revisit any of it. “Someone I would rather forget.”

As silence stretched between them, Frederick’s jaw hurt from how tensely he held it shut.

Beryl’s hand sought out his own. As she placed hers upon his, trembling overtook Frederick again.

How could he be married? How could he have ever agreed to look after a wife?

He shouldn’t even be alive.

Neither should Hatters.

Hatters . . . It had really been him.

A shiver worked its way down Frederick’s spine.

It seemed an odd coincidence that he had encountered Hatters on the very evening in which Frederick had become more clearly aware that his affections for Beryl had deepened.

Was it punishment?

It must be.

He was enjoying himself too much. Was that it?

He’d actually dared to believe that he could have a future unmarred by guilt or shame.

The rest of the journey home was silent, save for the rhythmic clip-clopping of the horses’ hooves.

Frederick squeezed his eyes shut, hearing the echo of a high-pitched whinny pierce the dusk in his all-too-vivid memories.

Beryl’s hand squeezed his, but not even her tender touch could

reach through his melancholy and warm his trembling heart.

He was overcome.

Faltering under the weight of guilt, of carrying its unforgiving burden for so many years.

He didn't even notice when the carriage rolled to a stop.

"We are home again, Frederick."

Somehow, he mustered strength enough to assist Beryl into their home.

Casting an aimless look back outside, he noticed the stranger observing him. The man nodded to him as he tended to one of the horses.

Frederick blinked.

The man wasn't a stranger after all. He was the new coachman.

Frederick reeled inwardly as he realised how strong a stupor he must have been in to not even recognise the man. More guilt plucked at him.

"Shall we have some tea?" asked Beryl, her melodic voice floating through the stillness of the hallway.

Frederick turned and stared at her. All he wanted to do was retreat to his study, away from everything and everyone.

Like you always do — run away and try to hide.

You know it will not help. Nothing can help you now. You are too far gone to ever—

Frederick grabbed his ears and shook his head. "Stop!"

A moment later, as his gaze fell upon Beryl, he froze. Tears brimmed in her wide, fear-filled eyes. Her shoulders were hunched yet tensed, as though she were making ready to flee.

"Tea," Frederick croaked. "Yes . . . Tea. Forgive me."

Beryl nodded slowly, still eyeing him with fear and suspicion. "Meet me in the drawing room?"

Frederick nodded, the walls seeming to swirl around him.

Pull yourself together, man.

She does not deserve this.

Barely aware of his actions, Frederick strode toward the drawing room. After closing the thick, wooden door behind him, he leaned against its firm solidity.

A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead, tracing the side of his face before disappearing beneath his collar.

He banged his head backward against the door. Then, again with a little extra force.

An urge to scream was building within him. To tear at the walls, the floor, whatever he could.

He was like an animal in a trap, fighting against confinement but with absolutely nowhere to go.

He lunged toward a chair. Grabbing it with both hands, he hoisted it up into the air.

Throw it.

He knew it would do no good.

Smash it.

With everything in him, he fought the urge to scream and launch the chair across the room.

No.

Think of Beryl.

You cannot frighten her.

You must not.

He exhaled fiercely as he banged the chair down into its place, frustration coursing through him.

He perched on the edge of the seat, tapping his foot so fast that the rest of him shook along with it.

Hatters.

It had really been him. And he'd looked just the same.

The *same*. As though it hadn't affected him at all.

Frederick knew the same could not be said about himself. Each time he beheld his face in a mirror he couldn't fail to notice the haggardness and care lines that had crept without mercy into his visage.

Physically, he'd been changed. In every other possible way, too. How could he not be?

How could *Hatters* not be?

The door clicked open, startling Frederick from his thoughts.

He stood, swiftly lurching toward Beryl, trembling all over as he transferred the tray she carried from her hands to his own.

Teacups clinked and rattled as he lowered the tray onto a table with a resounding clang.

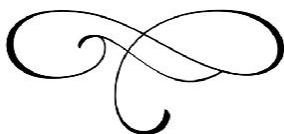
"Allow me . . ." she said, moving to prepare the tea, her voice soft and soothing.

Frederick's heart squeezed. He yearned to be free. To be a man who wasn't doomed, who could take his wife in his arms and blissfully move with her into a future of hope and love.

But how could he?

As Beryl's eyes met his, all the air seemed to crush from his lungs.

She deserves so much better . . .



"I DO HOPE you know that you can always talk to me. About anything," said Beryl, casting a worried glance at Frederick as she stirred a lump of sugar into his tea.

Frederick stared at her, his jaw twitching, his breathing ragged through flaring nostrils.

"Perhaps it would help you." Beryl paused. "It cannot be easy keeping everything stored up inside." She hesitated, glancing at the floor. "In fact, I know that it is not."

Frederick remained silent, yet his expression seemed to soften slightly.

"You are my husband," Beryl continued, looking up at him, her heart picking up pace. "I . . . I care for you."

The haunted look that Beryl had so often seen reappeared in Frederick's eyes. When he eventually spoke, his voice emerged in a bitter whisper. "You ought not to."

For a moment Beryl thought she'd misheard him. She frowned. "What?"

He dragged a weary hand down his face and shook his head dismissively, hanging his head low.

"Frederick, please . . . Tell me what it is that troubles you so." Beryl looked at him searchingly.

Frederick jolted from his chair and began pacing the length of the room. "I am sorry, Beryl! I should never . . ." He grabbed his head in his hands, shaking it as he walked.

Heavy silence engulfed them.

"I cannot imagine what those who have been to war have had to endure," said Beryl softly. "Perhaps, it might—"

"War?" Frederick spun on his heels to face Beryl. "I was damned before I ever went to the war!"

His loud, frantic tone and wild, terror-filled eyes sent a cold shiver down Beryl's spine. She truly did care for him — more deeply with each passing day. Hearing such solemn desperation in his voice roiled her gut and stole her breath away.

"*Damned?*" gasped Beryl. "What do you mean?" Silently, she prayed for Frederick's salvation — that he would willingly take hold of the hope and forgiveness that only God could offer.

Frederick resumed his restless pacing.

Silence filled the room again, weightier somehow than before.

Beryl watched helplessly as Frederick roved back and forth, desperation and anguish spilling out in his expressions and movements.

"I am not who you think I am," he said, his voice choked with regret.

Dreadful apprehension crept into Beryl's heart.

How tormented he was. Is this what happened to all soldiers upon their return to normal life? How many others were there up and down the country at this very moment in the same fitful agony of soul?

"I know who you are, Frederick. There is much I do not know, yes. But I know your character. I have seen it. You are kind, and gentle, and caring." She paused, praying for courage. "But you are wounded."

Frederick whipped round and fixed his tormented eyes upon her. "I am a murderer!" he screamed.

Weakness flooded through Beryl. She consciously tried to deepen her suddenly shallow breathing as she placed her half-empty teacup next to Frederick's, which was as yet untouched.

The war . . . Surely, he must mean the war . . .

Fixing her gaze on him, Beryl wanted to weep at the helpless, hopeless countenance staring back at her. She spoke, striving with all her might to keep the trembling that consumed her from creeping into her voice. "I do not believe that it is seen as murder when one must kill in a war situation . . . It is a matter of self-defence, surely."

Frederick raked his hand through his hair, before waving it in the air. "No! Not the war! Not the war . . ." he repeated, shaking his head distractedly. He exhaled sharply. Speaking again, his voice was softer. Quieter. "The man I . . . The man I saw this evening . . . He knows. He was there."

Beryl sat frozen, examining Frederick's face, desperate to discover his true meaning. Surely he had not purposefully murdered someone.

He could not have . . . could he?

She gripped the arm of her chair. As she observed the faraway look in Frederick's eyes and the mournful twist of his lips, she scrambled desperately to find words that might bring him some comfort. "Please, tell me what you mean . . . Frederick, you are—"

"I am not kind, and I am not gentle!" he bellowed. "I am *doomed*, Beryl. Doomed!" His shouting gave way to sobbing as he slumped into a heap on the floor.

"Frederick!" Tears sprang to Beryl's eyes as she flew off her seat toward him. Agony surged through her hip as she tried to find a way to kneel that was not unbearable.

Frederick lifted his head, exhaustion and tears lining his face. "No,

Beryl, no.” His face twisted bitterly. “I do not want you to suffer because of *me*.”

“Hush, now. I am all right,” said Beryl, pain twisting through her hip. She reached out and stroked his hair.

Frederick reached a hand up and clasped hers in it, pressing it against his cheek. He closed his eyes, silent tears streaming from them.

A moment later, upon opening his eyes, he looked at Beryl with such sorrow that she thought her heart might tear in two.

Despite the agony that burned in her hip, Beryl leaned her head forward, resting her forehead against Frederick’s. She squeezed her eyes closed as tears threatened to spill from them.

Please, help him to make sense, Lord. And to open up to me. Please . . . help us.

Frederick reached his other hand up and placed it on Beryl’s cheek, enclosing them both in quiet intimacy.

Slowly he moved his head up, and their lips met.

Connection and comfort zinged through Beryl. The sensation that surrounded her made her feel as though she had found a home at last.

As they parted, a sincerely happy smile branched out across her face as she opened her eyes.

Frederick seemed less agitated, yet his brow remained furrowed, and his eyes swam with sorrow.

He shook his head, lifting his eyebrows. “I do not deserve you,” he said, his eyes earnest and mournful.

“Frederick, do not say such things.” Beryl lifted her eyebrows amicably, smiling shyly. “Besides, it is too late now. For, I am afraid you are stuck with me,” she said playfully, silently willing his melancholy to lift.

Frederick swallowed hard and just stared.

Beryl wondered for a moment if he had even heard her.

“You will hate me,” Frederick said in a weak voice, shaking his head slowly, his gaze steady on her own.

Beryl’s heart sank. “I could never hate you, Frederick. Please, tell me about the man you saw tonight. And why seeing him has troubled you so much.”

Frederick drew a deep breath, clamping his eyes shut. He exhaled slowly as he opened his eyes, his gaze off to the side as though watching the memories play out in his mind’s eye.

“I shall help you,” said Beryl. “What is the man’s name?”

Her question was met with silence as Frederick stared past her.

“Only tell me his name,” said Beryl.

Frederick was silent a few moments more. “Hatters,” he croaked, looking queasy and faint as he said it.

An unusual name, thought Beryl.

“And tell me what it is that you think he knows,” she said aloud.

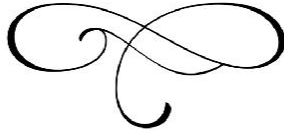
More silence.

“He knows what we did,” said Frederick, his voice wispy and troubled.

Beryl nodded slowly. “And . . . what did you do?”

Frederick exhaled a long, shuddering breath.

“We killed them.”



NAUSEA GATHERED in Beryl's gut as weakness flooded her muscles. She hesitated, still desperately trying to ascertain whether or not Frederick spoke of the war.

Surely, it could not be anything else.

It was Beryl's turn to take a deep breath. "Who did you . . . Who did you kill?" she asked, disbelief filling her upon hearing the words she'd just uttered.

Frederick sighed, closing his eyes. "I do not know." His face scrunched in torment. "I do not know their names. All I know is that they are gone from this earth . . . because of *me*." His voice was weary and bitter.

"Did this happen in France?" asked Beryl.

Frederick's eyes opened and he fixed his frowning face on hers. "No," he said. "In England."

Beryl's eyes widened.

Surely not.

Frederick swallowed hard. "I was visiting Hatters." He sighed, squeezing his eyes shut. "We met at school. We kept in touch. I went to visit him." His voice was laced with regret and even a trace of disbelief. "Then . . . we killed them."

Beryl grasped one of Frederick's hands, which had fallen into his lap a little while before. "Tell me what happened," she said, her stomach churning as she fought to understand. "Please."

Frederick opened his eyes briefly, searched her face, then looked off to the side. "We were riding. It was getting dark. We did not see them. Not until it was too late."

He sighed. "The horse spooked. We had no idea they were there."

He grabbed his forehead in one of his hands, rubbing it with his fingers over and over again. "We had been drinking," he said, his teeth gritted in painful remembrance, his voice barely concealing his anguish.

Compassion and dread mingled within Beryl's heart as images of some horrible tragedy flashed through her mind — people being trampled by horses ridden by drunken men. People unseen until it was too late.

A shudder shook her as Frederick's words brought to mind her own

tragic experience all those years ago.

Beryl squeezed his hand. "It was an accident, then?"

"That changes nothing," he said bitterly.

"It changes a great deal!" Sorrow remained embedded in her heart, yet a measure of relief washed through her. "Oh, Frederick, the way you spoke . . . it sounded as though you had *intentionally* killed someone. But you did not. That—"

"It is little comfort, Beryl. Those involved are no less dead as a result of my recklessness!" Torment flashed in Frederick's eyes.

Beryl silently observed him, longing to impart a measure of comfort yet knowing she could not.

She stroked his hair, noting for a moment how soft yet strong it seemed between her fingers.

Beryl sighed, then fixed her focus fully on Frederick. "You said the horse spooked?"

"Yes."

"And, surely, you attempted to regain control of it?"

"Yes."

"But you could not."

"No . . ." Hopelessness and regret almost choked the word into silence.

Beryl squeezed his hand again. "Frederick, listen to me — it was an accident," she said, her voice soft and gentle. "You cannot blame yourself for something over which you had no control."

Frederick shook his head and fixed his tormented gaze upon her. "I had control over a great deal of my actions that evening, Beryl. I never should have agreed to go out for a ride with Hatters after we had been drinking so much. I should have been paying more attention on the road, and urging Hatters to do the same. I should have made him take us back to ensure that they were all right!"

"Road?" Beryl frowned. "Your horses trampled over people — without you seeing them — on a road?"

"Trampled?" Frederick's brows met as his eyes squinted.

"You were riding, you said. On horses. And one of them spooked."

Understanding erased his frown as regret filled his eyes again. "We were not on horseback," he said, shaking his head slowly. "We were in Hatters's gig. There was only one horse."

Beryl's eyes widened. "So, the gig ran over people?"

Frederick frowned again. "No." The haunted look returned to his eyes as he drew a ragged breath. "We were driving down a country lane, near where Hatters and his family lived."

Frederick's head and shoulders writhed in agony. "It came out of nowhere. Before we knew what was happening, the horse had reared and whinnied, then bolted past it."

An odd sensation flooded through Beryl. "It?"

"A carriage." Frederick seemed lost in his memories, his head slowly and repeatedly shaking from side to side and his voice wavering. "There was no collision. Nothing that indicated what . . . what . . ."

Beryl's stomach lurched. Frederick had caused a carriage accident? And people had died?

She tensed as a thought gripped her.

No.

No, surely not.

She instructed herself to relax. This was Frederick's past. Not hers.

Besides, carriage accidents happened all the time. The two incidents had nothing more to connect them than a country road and a speeding gig.

Still, the troubling similarities plucked at her mind.

Trepidation pulsed through Beryl. "When did this happen, Frederick?"

"Five years ago," came the hoarse reply. "Though, in many ways, it seems as though it were only yesterday."

Beryl's breathing faltered and the room seemed to sway.

No.

Surely not.

Never had saying one word commanded so much effort from Beryl. "Where?"

"Just outside the village where Hatters lived."

Be calm, be calm.

It cannot be what you think.

Yet stiffness had already worked its way into her hunched, quivering frame. She prayed that the contents of her stomach would stay where they were as she drew a tight breath.

"The village . . . What was it called?"

"Why does it matter where it happened? Surely the fact that it happened at all is the *real* issue, here!"

Frederick's agitation startled Beryl for a moment, but her desire to know the truth soon eclipsed her fear.

"What was the village called?" Desperation and dread altered her voice.

Frederick looked up at her, his brow furrowing in a silent question.

After a short, strained silence, he spoke.

"Lindenfell."

Beryl didn't know whether to faint, vomit or shriek. Her body instantaneously cried out in longing to do all three.

"*Lindenfell?*" she croaked, in a whisper.

Beryl's voice sounded foreign to her own ears. Everything around

her swayed and tilted.

No . . .

It cannot be . . .

Buzzing filled Beryl's ears. "How . . . how many died?"

She feared she already knew the answer. Two. Miss Jenkins, and the coachman.

"Three," said Frederick grimly, his gaze dropping from her face as his shoulders bowed down even more.

Beryl blinked, grateful yet surprised at the difference in detail. "Three?"

The buzzing subsided a little.

"That is what we heard, a few days later," he said wearily.

Only two options presented themselves in Beryl's mind: either Frederick had heard the wrong tally, or it wasn't the same accident as hers.

"Do you know . . . anything about them?" she asked, wondering if Frederick could hear how loudly her heart thudded.

Please, Lord . . .

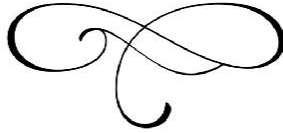
No.

It couldn't have been the same accident as hers.

He'd said three. Not two.

Surely, it could not—

Frederick's voice was as heavy as his eyelids. "One of them was the coachman. And, I believe one of them was a teacher . . . or a governess."



BERYL FROZE.

She silently observed the man she'd been falling in love with.

The man to whom she was bound for the rest of her life.

Horror washed over her.

Her whole life had been altered irrevocably . . . by *Frederick*?

Miss Jenkins and the coachman . . . had died . . . because of *Frederick*?

A faint cry escaped Beryl's lips.

Her hip echoed with agony as she hauled herself toward a chair and flung herself onto it, burying her face in her hands.

Trembling overtook her.

"Beryl?"

Frederick's voice sounded distant and muffled.

Beryl raised her head to see him. How different he looked now, yet nothing in his appearance had changed.

But everything had altered.

How vast the chasm that had suddenly widened between them.

Anguish squeezed Beryl's lungs so tightly that there didn't seem to be enough air in the room.

Her head pounded, her vision blurring.

She swiped a trembling hand over her clammy forehead.

"Beryl! Are you ill?" Frederick rushed toward her, kneeling in front of her.

She could only manage a word between each gasp. "It . . . was . . . *you*?" Her entire body trembled.

"What?" Frederick frowned, confusion and apprehension in his eyes.

"The gig . . . the accident!" Her composure crumpled, and tears poured down her cheeks. "I was there, Frederick . . ."

"Where?" Frederick asked, brushing a matted strand of hair away from her face.

Beryl thought she might vomit. "In the carriage."

Frederick looked at her as though she'd taken leave of her senses. His voice was almost a whisper. "What?"

"I am from Lindenfell. It happened five years ago. It was the same accident."

Everything within her screamed against the knowledge.

It cannot be true, surely it cannot be true . . .

Frederick's face fell, his brow pinched with trepidation.

His head shook gently as his eyes blinked rapidly. "What? No . . . you are from *Bath*."

"I was *sent* to Bath. After my accident. I am from Lindenfell."

Frederick froze, his gaze solemn. "*Your* accident?" His voice caught in his throat.

"There were three of us with the carriage. The others died. I survived alone."

Frederick perched motionless before her, his eyes flitting across her face as fast as it seemed his thoughts raced within him.

Beryl wiped her cheek, trying to hold back the sobs still building within her. "My governess, Miss Jenkins, died almost instantly—"

"Jenkins?" Frederick whispered, his eyebrows scrunched and his eyes narrow. "The woman whom . . . whom my *father* spoke of?" His voice wavered.

Beryl nodded, silent tears rolling down each of her cheeks. "I saw her die!" Her face crumpled in agonising remembrance. "I heard later that the coachman died, too. I survived . . . but I was injured. And soon after, I was sent to Bath. To live with my aunt." She gazed at Frederick through weary, harrowed eyes.

Frederick's jaw had never looked so tense, his frown unmistakably revealing his alarm.

His whole countenance altered as unwilling, horrified realisation filled his eyes. "Your limp?" he whispered.

The devastation and fear on his face indicated that he already knew the answer.

Beryl nodded as the sobs overtook her, spilling out into the deathly silent room.

So many emotions jostled within her.

Betrayal.

Mistrust.

Sorrow.

Disbelief.

Each fought for room to expand and dominate.

How was she supposed to be a wife to someone who had hurt her so deeply — who had not only caused her limp, but the death of her dearest friend?

Beryl had always struggled to forgive the person responsible for causing the accident, yet forgiveness had seemed so much easier to attain when its object was some unknown stranger.

Now, it was her husband — the one to whom she had been forever joined in matrimony. The one with whom she had hoped to enjoy a

future of happiness.

How could they be happy now?

How could she ever trust him?

She couldn't even bear to look at him to see his response.

She was alone again, deep inside.

And now, she always would be.

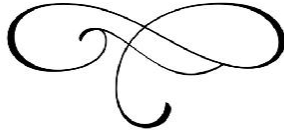
She had never expected to miss Bath, or her aunt's house.

Yet, at this moment, all she wanted to do was rush back there and
hide away.

From Frederick.

From the memories.

From *everything*.



FREDERICK STARED at Beryl in silent horror.

Could it really be true?

Not only had he killed two innocent people — one of whom was known and held in high regard by his parents — but he had also injured forever the woman who was now his wife?

Slowly, Frederick rose to a stand, staggering backward, wanting both to cry out in anguish and to weep.

An age seemed to pass, each of them silent, save for Beryl's heartbroken sobs.

Tears pricked Frederick's eyes.

"Beryl," he tried to say. All that emerged was a weak croak.

There can be no question now that you are doomed.

Killing your wife's governess — the very person whose influence compelled your parents to seek Beryl out for you to marry?

Leaving your beautiful wife disfigured and disabled?

You are pathetic.

Causing so much destruction, then running away to the war and causing more.

Yet not one musket could find you as its target?

Frederick tugged at his cravat, loosening it at first, then tearing it off and throwing it, crumpled, beside his feet.

Guilt strangled him, choking all his hope.

Why had he survived the war?

He hadn't thought it possible to reach new depths of misery. Yet, here he was, surrounded by even worse knowledge of what he'd done.

What he had truly taken, that day.

He eyed the bent, weeping form in front of him.

His lovely wife.

He had dared to hope, dared to imagine that perhaps one day, he could know true happiness with her.

But he alone had ruined it.

Ruined it before he'd even met her.

Five years. Five years he'd been tormented.

And so had she.

He'd assumed that her limp had been an affliction she'd lived with since birth. Beryl hadn't ever suggested otherwise, and Frederick

hadn't pried.

But no.

It was all *his* doing.

Frederick swallowed hard. Everything in him wanted to bolt from the room, to run away and hide.

For a moment, he hesitated.

He ought to stay.

He ought to remain with her. Comfort her, somehow. Reassure her how truly regretful he was.

A torrent of emotions and accusations froze him to the spot.

She cannot even look at you.

She hates you now.

Go.

Drink.

That is all you are good at.

That, and causing pain.

Frederick stared at Beryl. She hadn't stirred.

How could he ever make it up to her?

Even as his heart asked the question, he knew the answer.

He couldn't.

Frederick was weak all over, his head pounding, his heart throbbing.

Almost before he knew what he was doing, he reached for the door handle, noticed a cool breeze on his face as the door opened, and found himself walking down the lonely, darkening hallway toward his office.

Inside, he didn't bother to relight the candles. He knew where everything was by now.

Everything he needed, at least.

The glass decanter jolted slightly as his trembling hand knocked into it.

Drawing it to himself as though it were a comforting blanket, he clutched the etched crystal bottle to his chest.

The familiar vapours wafted up into his nose.

Drink it.

Drink it all and be done with the pain.

As Frederick took his first swig, he knew the voice in his head was lying to him.

Nothing truly numbed the pain.

And nothing could ever erase it.

Frederick sat motionless, replaying the conversation with Beryl in his mind.

How had his nightmare taken such a devastating turn?

Not only had he killed people, but he had injured Beryl, and in so

doing, had quashed the burgeoning hope of any future relationship the two of them might have shared.

All the liquor in the world couldn't fix that.

You ought to have tried harder in the war to ensure that you did not return from it.

Tears rolled slowly down Frederick's cheeks as he swallowed swig after swig, crumpled in a heap against the wall, his hand raking and pulling his hair over and over again.

"Beryl . . ." he whispered, his tears turning to sobs. "What have I done?"

Scenes from that fateful night burned through his mind.

Hatters laughing.

The carriage appearing out of nowhere in the dusk.

The horse rearing, then bolting down the winding dirt road.

The whole event must have only lasted mere seconds. Yet it had tormented him — and Beryl, too — for five long years.

Frederick shook his head as he sobbed, a new, deeper anguish filling every ounce of his soul.

She will never forgive you.

He yelled in fervent agony of heart, throwing the now empty decanter across the room.

As he heard it smash, he pictured other scenes from that night. Scenes he had not been privy to witness.

The carriage toppling over.

Beryl lying hurt inside it.

Her governess within it beside her. Dead.

What fear and terror Beryl must have felt . . . It rendered him speechless to imagine.

She would be better off without you.

She would.

He couldn't fight it. Not now.

It would have been better for her if he had never been born. If he hadn't survived the war.

If he had never had a chance to play a part in what had happened.

How could he face her again?

A moment of clarity pierced him.

He had just left her there. In the drawing room.

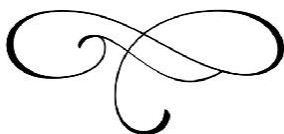
He'd left her alone to process the horrific truth that had just come to light.

You are even more pathetic than you know.

As the alcohol began to dull his mind, swarms of flashbacks and memories surrounded him, each growing fainter and dimmer as he curled onto his side.

Tears rolled down his cheeks until the very moment exhaustion

finally pulled him into a restless, troubled sleep.



BERYL SAT on the window seat in her room, staring through the panes at the same row of chimneys she'd stared at for the past few days.

Her heart and mind were every bit as heavy and numb as they had been the night of Frederick's confession.

"Mrs. Sinclair?" The familiar voice was followed by a gentle knock.

"Come in, Millie," said Beryl, her voice hoarse and weary.

"I brought you some breakfast, ma'am," said the maid, placing a tray upon a table not too far from where Beryl sat. Millie glanced around the room, her gaze coming to rest on the tray she'd delivered the previous evening. "Oh, ma'am, you barely ate any of your dinner," said Millie, her eyes wide with concern.

Beryl stared at the young woman without really seeing her and gave an eventual shrug.

"Is there anything in particular I can get for you, ma'am? Anything you would like me to do?" Millie's expression and voice were saturated with kindness.

"No," croaked Beryl. "Thank you. I appreciate all that you have done so far."

Millie gave a nod and gathered up the evening tray, taking it with her as she left the room.

Beryl sighed. Ever since Frederick's revelation she had stayed in her room, not even going down for meals. Millie had taken to bringing food up to her at each mealtime.

Today was the third day she'd been here, alone in her torment.

She'd tried desperately to cling to God's word and to pray for His strength and help, but most of the time she'd been overwhelmed with a disabling numbness that seemed to crush her from within, on all sides.

Frederick had knocked once yesterday.

At least, Beryl had thought it was him.

The knock had sounded like his — polite and gentle — and she'd stopped crying long enough to hear her name whispered softly. The voice had sounded a little like Frederick's, only altered with grief.

Guilt kept flitting in and out of Beryl's heart.

It *had* been an accident, after all. Frederick hadn't *meant* for anyone to get hurt.

But he'd been drinking.

He'd been reckless.

And his carelessness had ended the earthly lives of two dear souls.

Continuously, Beryl's thoughts and emotions alternated from anger at Frederick to pity for him.

"Lord, help me, please!" she said, sobbing. "Your word says that Your grace is sufficient, that Your strength is made perfect in weakness. Oh, Lord, I am so weak — in every way. And Frederick . . ." She shook her head. "He needs you, Lord. Help me to face him. Help me . . . to forgive him." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I do not know how, Lord. I do not even know if I can. But Your word says that I should, and I know that You can help me to do all things. Nothing is impossible with You, Lord — no matter how impossible it feels!"

Her voice cracked as more sobs poured out.

When no more tears would come, numbness settled around her again.

Glancing out the window, she noticed a small flock of birds flying past the chimney pots. She stared at them with rapt attention.

If only she were a bird. Able to fly anywhere, to move freely. Not broken or bruised, not weighed down by infirmity. Able to soar, to glide . . .

To be free.

As the birds disappeared out of sight, she leaned her head back against the alcove wall and closed her eyes.

Please, Lord, show me what it is like to feel as the birds do.

Show me what it is like to be unfettered . . . and free.



FREDERICK AWOKE WITH A START, jolting his head upward from where it had been resting on his arms, which were still folded and leaning on his desk.

He blinked, taking in his surroundings, swallowing the taste of stale alcohol and becoming aware once more of the sick ache in his stomach.

A knock sounded at the door.

Another one? Was that what had woken him?

He couldn't recall.

"Come in," he said, trepidation overtaking him as he wondered what he might do if the door opened to reveal Beryl.

A footman appeared instead. "A letter for you, sir. An urgent one."

Frederick reached for the missive. "Thank you, Smith."

"It is Swift, sir," the footman said with a polite nod, then took his leave.

Frederick sighed and rubbed his face in his hands.

Was it really three days now that he'd been holed up in his study?

He had ventured out only for meals, though none of his attempts to eat had been very successful. And for each one, he had sat alone in the dining room, both dreading Beryl's appearance and yearning for it.

Yesterday he'd even plucked up the courage to knock on her door, but only silence had met him.

He thought he'd heard the faint snuffle of weeping, which had torn his heart enough that he'd drained another decanter dry immediately afterward, glad that the new household staff didn't know him well enough to rebuke him. His childhood butler would never have enabled him to drink so much. The man had been suspicious a few times when Frederick had still lived at home. What would he think if he could see him now?

Frederick glanced at the letter Swift had brought in. It looked . . . official.

Sobering as he began to open it, Frederick scanned the page, not fully taking in the words in his hurry to read them.

A heavy sensation settled in his stomach.

He read it again, more carefully this time.

As his gaze lingered on the signature at the bottom of the page, he wasn't sure what to think.

He read the middle part again.

You are receiving this letter as a summons. The situation in France has become volatile once more, and you must rejoin your regiment immediately.

Perhaps it was a sign.

Perhaps, this time, a musket *would* find him.

But Beryl . . . How could he leave now, without seeing her, without trying somehow to make it up to her?

You cannot make it up to her. Why should she ever wish to be close to the person who stole her friend — and her health — from her?

Frederick released a long-held, heavy sigh.

Perhaps it *was* for the best.

After all, how could Beryl ever forgive him? What did he have left to live for, now that his hopes of a happy future with her had been shattered?

Shattered at your own hand.

Frederick glanced again at the details for his travel which had been set out in the letter. He didn't have any time to waste.

He would go. At once.

He would rejoin his regiment, and hopefully this time he would not return.

Still, there was one matter to which he must attend before he

could leave. One difficult matter indeed.

He must write to Beryl to let her know that he had been recalled, and to tell her how unutterably sorry he was for all that he had done.

Frederick pictured her reading the letter he was about to write. Would she be relieved?

Glad, even?

His thoughts wandered to what would happen after he was killed in action.

She would have this house, the staff, her painting room. All the books he had bought for her. And he'd seen the marriage contract himself — in the event of Frederick's death, his father would supply whatever income was necessary to ensure that Beryl would have all that she might need for a good standard of living.

It was a small comfort to think of her being well-provided for, but his throat burned to think of her all alone.

She had so much to give. So much talent and loveliness to share.

But he had devastated her.

He had left her with a wound far worse than the affliction in her hip.

He had broken her heart five years ago.

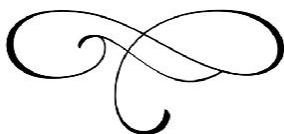
And last night he had watched it break all over again.

All because of *him*.

Frederick snatched up his quill. As he scratched the inked nib over the page, his jaw firmed.

He must go. And he must make sure that what should have happened the first time would happen this time, without fail.

And thus, he would never be able to break Beryl's heart ever again.



BERYL'S HANDS trembled as she wiped her cheeks. She ought to go down. She ought to try to face Frederick.

But how? Each time she imagined doing so, an unsettled mixture of anger and sadness overwhelmed her, pinning her to her chair.

She gasped, then held her breath. Were those footsteps approaching?

It was too early for Millie to be returning with more food.

It could only be . . .

A scuffling sound seemed to scrape in the doorway.

She listened, straining to hear more.

Nothing.

Beryl stood, surveying the whole door. Surprise jolted through her as she noticed a letter lying just inside her room.

Frederick must have slipped it underneath the door.

She froze, realising she had only heard his footsteps approaching, but had not yet heard them leave.

Rooted to the spot, Beryl listened and waited.

Just as she was about to move toward the letter she heard movement outside the door, and the sound of footsteps retreating into the distance, growing ever softer until silence filled her ears once again.

Overcome with emotion and intrigue she rushed at the letter, grasping it with trembling hands.

Turning it over, she saw her name in handwriting that she recognised from seeing various papers in her husband's study.

It was Frederick's hand, no doubt.

Tears filled her eyes as she thought of his kind eyes, and of how accommodating he had been to her since she had come to London.

Such hope had stirred within her as time had passed.

And that kiss . . .

Now, it all seemed lost.

Broken beyond repair.

Beryl exhaled forcefully, realising she had been holding her breath. As she unfolded the paper, she silently prayed for strength as she began to read.

Dear Beryl,

In truth, I do not even know how to begin this letter. I have wished many times to see you these past few days, that I might tell you face to face how grieved and regretful I am for all the pain and hurt that I have caused you these last five years.

Words do not seem enough when faced with devastation of this magnitude, yet they are all I have to offer. And so, I wish for you to know that — truly — if it was within my ability to go back and to change what happened, I would do so without delay, no matter the cost.

Beryl, I am truly, deeply sorry.

I also must inform you that I have received this day a summons. I am being recalled to my regiment with immediate effect. I must leave at once.

In my heart, I yearn to see you before I depart. However, I wholly understand why you would never wish to see me again.

How different things might have been, had it not been for my irresponsible behaviour that dreadful day. I can never fully convey to you how sorry I truly am.

Farewell, my beautiful bride. I earnestly hope that you shall have all that you need, and that — one day — you might somehow be free from the torment that I have unwittingly and regretfully inflicted upon you.

Continue painting those beautiful works of art that you are so skilled at creating.

May you have everything you need for a long and happy life.

I only wish that circumstances could be altered, that I might have shared it with you.

Yours,

Frederick

A TEAR SLID from Beryl's cheek onto the page, blurring some of the ink.

Frederick was leaving? Was that why he had lingered outside her door — in hope that she had read the letter upon its arrival and would open the door to bid him farewell?

She scanned the page again.

Yearned to see her, he'd said.

And she knew that he was truly sorry. Deep in her heart, she knew that he meant every word.

An ache filled Beryl's chest and spread to her throat. She ought to see him before he took his leave.

She ought to go down.

Yet as she pictured seeing him, the question that had plagued her for the past few days resonated over and over in her mind — how were they supposed to move past this?

How could they overcome such a towering obstacle?

Something tugged at Beryl's heart as she remembered the verse from the Bible that said, '*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*'

She had known the truth of that verse in her own life. God had made it evident to her throughout her recovery from the accident, and in the years since, as she had readjusted to an altered reality.

Now, perhaps, God was trying to make it clear to her again — that she could do all things in *His* strength, not her own.

Even this.

She cast her eyes over the letter again, reading various phrases before going back to the top to read it again in its entirety.

As she read, her brow furrowed, and her breathing stilled.

A sense of dread and foreboding washed over her.

Frederick's letter . . . It was almost as though he had written it without any expectation of returning home again.

It almost sounded as though he were saying goodbye — *forever*.

At the thought, a sick trembling overcame her. Beryl thought for a moment of the war, of the dangers that soldiers faced.

She could hardly breathe as she imagined harm coming to Frederick.

What if he never came back?

What if he died, alone on a battlefield, without the two of them ever seeing one another again?

Beryl scrambled to her feet.

She still didn't know how they could ever recover from what had been revealed, but she knew one thing — she could not let him leave without seeing him. She had to at least let him know that she would be praying for him while he was gone, no matter what the condition of their relationship might be when he returned.

Beryl pulled open her door, half expecting to see Frederick still standing there.

He wasn't.

"Frederick?" she called out as she moved toward his door, knocking it lightly with her fingers.

Her emotions were at war. Half of her wanted him to answer, yet the other half vehemently did not.

She repeated the knock, calling his name again.

Silence.

Beryl made her way downstairs as fast as she could, which was not very fast at all. Once she was steadily situated on the ground floor, she waited a flash of a moment for the pain to settle before venturing toward Frederick's study.

She fought against a wave of nausea as she knocked on the study door, remembering the sight of him clutching the decanter, and

hearing in the echoes of her memory the chilling howl that had erupted from him that night.

Frederick was haunted, too — hadn't she suspected that?

And now, it all made sense. He *was* haunted. Not only by the war, but by the event that had haunted her own mind these past five years.

He had known that he'd been responsible for the accident, even though he hadn't known it had been the one in which Beryl had been injured.

He'd lived with the knowledge that people had died at his hand. And, even though their deaths had not been intentional, the weight of guilt had tortured him day and night, ever since.

Despite the part of her that wanted to hide away from him, the part that felt betrayed by him, Beryl's heart ached with compassion to think of how affected he had been by it all.

Another thought struck her.

Of all the people to whom a marriage could have been arranged, she had been joined to the one person alive who knew more about the source of her suffering than anyone else ever could.

She had been joined to the only other person whose life had been derailed by the very same occurrence.

Surely, that could not be a coincidence. Especially considering how God works everything together for His glory and for the good of those who love Him.

Had this unforeseen turn of events all been arranged by God?

Was this His way of helping Beryl and Frederick deal with the sorrow and suffering that the accident had caused each of them?

No answer had come from the study, so Beryl repeated her knocking and calling, opening the door as she voiced his name once again.

The sight of the empty study drew fresh tears to her eyes.

"No," she croaked, turning and hurrying as best she could toward the drawing room.

Empty.

The dining room — could he be in there? Perhaps he was eating a hasty meal before his departure.

Beryl's shoes tapped the hallway in a lopsided rhythm as she approached the dining room. She pushed the door open and rushed in, expecting to see him hurriedly munching, his strong, straight back pressed against one of the chairs.

But each chair was as empty as the room.

Beryl's breathing grew more shallow as tears started to fall.

She moved back into the hallway. "Frederick!" she half-called, half-shrieked.

There was a rustling of fabric behind her. Just before she could

turn to see who it was, a hand pressed down on her shoulder.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

Beryl turned, her heart sinking even more. “Millie . . . Is he gone already?”

“A few minutes ago, ma’am. I thought he had called on you.”

Beryl staggered backward.

He was gone. She was too late.

“He did,” whispered Beryl. “He left me a letter.”

Millie’s face tucked with sympathy. “I am sorry, ma’am.”

Beryl nodded as she turned to make her way to her painting room.

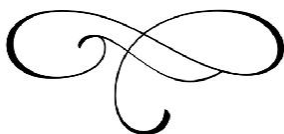
Once inside, a wail broke forth from her that she was powerless to contain.

She was too late.

Slowly, she sank trembling to the floor, consumed by sobbing once again.

Anguish clutched at her heart, at her throat.

What if she never saw him again?



FREDERICK TOSSED and turned in his cramped quarters, unable to sleep despite his fatigue.

He'd forgotten how France smelled, how it felt. He'd met the other soldiers in his regiment, reconnected with his old friends, Talbot and Stanley, then he'd pushed some food around on his plate before retiring for the night.

The whole journey, all he'd thought about was Beryl.

Images of her still dominated his thoughts. How had she reacted to his letter? Had she been glad to hear of his departure?

Was there even a small part of her that would miss him?

Why would she miss you when all you have caused her is pain and misery?

Frederick drew a deep, steadying breath. He mustn't think of it all. Not anymore.

He had come here to accomplish that which had eluded him previously. His life, little as he thought it was worth, must be offered.

It was a small token, but it was all he had to give.

"To your stations!"

The forceful beckon obliterated the silence.

Frederick leaped out of bed, his heart picking up speed. Scuffling and clanking surrounded filled his ears, as the soldiers readied themselves.

Outside, the night air was cool and crisp. Visibility was limited, but he'd dealt with all that before.

"Sinclair! Over here!"

Frederick looked to see a broad-shouldered man beckoning him toward himself. He recognised the man's face but couldn't think of his name.

Frederick looked about him as he made his way toward the man, nodding a greeting as he reached him.

"We can see much better from here," the man said, his keen blue eyes roving the distance in front of them.

"Indeed," said Frederick as he followed the man's gaze.

"It all seems rather quiet . . . I expect we shall have an uneventful night."

Frederick was silent. A quiet night was not what he'd been hoping

for. The grief and guilt that knotted in a sick heap in his stomach seemed only to grow more and more unbearable each second.

“Are you all right, Sinclair?” The man regarded him not with impatience or contempt, but with something else.

Something that looked remarkably like compassion.

“Fine, thank you . . .”

“Paulson,” the man said with a smile. “You do not remember me?”

Frederick studied the man’s face, trying desperately to place him. “I . . .”

Paulson drew his lips into a straight line. “I was a close friend to Barrington.”

The sight of a shot tearing through Barrington flashed back into Frederick’s mind. He’d been standing right beside him — mere inches away from being the one robbed of his life that night.

It should have been you instead of young Barrington.

“I see,” said Frederick, after a few moments of pained silence.

“I miss him still,” said Paulson.

The air around Frederick seemed to press closer. “As do I.”

Paulson gave a closed-lipped smile of sympathy, then drew a deep breath. “However,” he said, clearly endeavouring to sound more cheerful. “At least he is happy now.”

Frederick frowned. “Happy?”

Something seemed to flicker in Paulson’s eyes. “I was referring to heaven,” he said kindly. “As you and anyone who was ever within ten yards of the man know, Barrington was a man of faith. He trusted the Lord for forgiveness and atonement. God’s word promises that those who repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus will live forever with God after departing this world.”

Frederick swallowed hard, then nodded. “Of course. Barrington was a good man.”

Paulson’s eyebrows raised slightly. “That is not what the Bible teaches.”

Frederick frowned. Surely Barrington couldn’t have been mentioned in the Bible. “What do you mean?”

“Well, according to Scripture, there is no one good. No one except Jesus. He said that Himself. Since the fall of man in Eden, sin has dominated man’s heart. Scripture tells us that no one does good, that every man seeks his own way, and that sin leads us all astray, like a wandering sheep trying to find greener grass.” His lips stretched into a smile and his eyes began to twinkle. “But Scripture also tells us that God has placed all of our sin and iniquity on the Lord, and that when we come to Him in repentance and faith, He takes our wicked heart and replaces it with a new, clean heart — full of thoughts and desires that please Him.” He shook his head briefly. “On our own, we are

doomed, Sinclair. Barrington knew that. He knew that Jesus was his only hope. That is why he asked God for the forgiveness that only He can give. The restoration. The atonement.”

Atonement.

A word, a question that had plagued Frederick for years — how could he ever atone for what he had done?

He shifted uncomfortably, moving his weight from one foot to the other, his gaze drifting to the ground.

“What about you, Sinclair?”

Frederick snapped his head up and looked at Paulson in bewilderment. “I beg your pardon?”

“Do you know the Lord?”

Frederick sighed, uncomfortable at Paulson’s directness. “Well, I . . . I know of Him, of course . . .”

Paulson nodded slowly, something in his eyes that Frederick couldn’t decipher. “Of course. Most Englishmen do. However . . .” He glanced back at the horizon, before turning his earnest gaze back on Frederick. “It is not enough to know *about* Him. We must know Him and be known by Him. We are called to repent, and to put all of our faith and trust in Him.”

Frederick wanted nothing more than to run back to his quarters.

He cleared his throat. “Surely, though, there are some people that God may not wish to know, or forgive.”

Paulson raised his eyebrows, a look of genuine surprise filling his eyes. “His word tells us that He is not willing that *any* should perish — He wants *all* men to come to repentance.”

“But surely there are people who have done too much evil to ever be forgiven.”

Paulson’s raised eyebrows knitted together. “Not at all. No one can ever out-sin God’s grace.”

Frederick’s head jerked back in disbelief. Paulson meant well, that much was evident. But on this, the man was clearly mistaken.

Paulson studied Frederick for a moment. “We have all broken at least one of God’s commandments, have we not? And His word teaches that whoever breaks one is guilty of breaking them all. Someone who told one lie is as guilty as someone who committed murder.”

Frederick flinched. That was him.

A murderer.

Beryl’s voice echoed in his head. *Frederick, it was an accident. You cannot blame yourself for something over which you had no control.*

But he did have control. Or, at least, he *should* have.

He’d had control over how much he’d allowed himself to drink. Over getting into the gig in the first place. Over listening to Hatters

and his irresponsible urgings.

“You feel unworthy of His forgiveness?”

Paulson’s clear, kind voice broke through Frederick’s clouded thoughts.

“It is not merely a feeling,” Frederick said after a long pause. “It is a fact.” He firmed his jaw. “There can be no forgiveness for what I have done,” he said, his voice low and sombre.

Paulson tilted his head slightly. “Might I ask what it is that you have done that you feel is bigger than God’s love for you?”

Grief squeezed Frederick’s heart. As if God could ever love *him*.

A strong urge for alcohol swept through Frederick’s mouth and heart. He groaned inwardly. When would this man — who was practically a stranger to him — stop asking such personal questions?

“Time to get some sleep after all,” said Talbot quietly, approaching them a moment later to spread the news that they were all now free to go.

Frederick clapped a hand of thanks on his old friend’s shoulder and mustered a tight smile.

As Talbot said something to Paulson, Frederick let out a frustrated sigh.

None of it mattered now, anyway. He had come back for one purpose — to try to atone for what he had done.

That was all that mattered now.

It didn’t seem as though there would be any fighting tonight, after all. But tomorrow . . .

Tomorrow he would make sure to place himself squarely in harm’s way.

Talbot left them, falling into step with Stanley, who upon seeing Frederick raised a hand in a friendly greeting.

After returning the gesture, Frederick turned to go.

As he did, Paulson’s gentle voice pierced the night. “Sinclair?”

Frederick looked back at the man who stood unmoving before him, the very picture of contentment and patience.

Peace seemed to practically radiate from the man.

Rage boiled inside Frederick as he reflected on what Paulson had been saying before Talbot had interrupted them.

Glancing behind him to ensure that the others were out of earshot, Frederick stepped closer to Paulson, spitting his words out through gritted teeth. “What do you want from me?”

Paulson’s gaze fixed on him, steady and compassionate. “Sinclair . . .”

“You wish to hear the truth, do you? Well, the truth is that I have done nothing but hurt and destroy lives! People have died — because of *me*!” His voice alternated between roaring and shouting as he

spoke. "People have been hurt and wounded and *devastated* because of *me*! Do you know what that is like, Paulson? Do you know how it feels to carry the weight of that on your shoulders every minute of every day?"

Frederick's countenance shifted from anger to anguish.

"And then, after years of trying to find a way out of it, you see a glimmer of hope, only for it to be *shattered* because of what you did all those years ago that you *cannot* change! I do not deserve a second chance, or atonement, or God's love — two souls are *dead* because of me. And not on a battlefield — on a country road in England. Because I had been selfish. Because I had been drinking. Because I had been thinking only of myself! *My* pleasure, *my* thrills. Can God forgive *that*? Taking two lives, not in a noble cause, or in a life-or-death situation in a war, but in a moment of folly and drunkenness? Two!"

Again, he stepped closer to Paulson, nodding almost frantically as he continued. "I believed it to be three, but I recently discovered that the third person lived. The third person is now my *wife*. And since that day, she has lived with pain and infirmity — because of *me*!" Frederick fixed his wild, teary eyes on the silent man before him, and as he spoke again, his voice took on a weary hush. "There is nothing for me now. I know that I am doomed. I could *never* deserve forgiveness, even if it were possible."

Paulson stepped toward him, his expression full of compassion. He spoke earnestly, his voice serious and calm. "Not one of us deserves forgiveness, Sinclair. That is what I am trying to tell you. No one can ever *deserve* it."

Frederick frowned and blinked. The man wasn't making any sense.

"We are *all* doomed because of what we have done, because of the commandments of God that we have broken," Paulson continued. "But He offers us atonement, still. Not because we could ever do anything to *deserve* it, but because of how good and kind and loving *He* is. And no matter how much pain and suffering you have caused, God can redeem it."

Paulson placed a warm hand on Frederick's shoulder. "He loves you, Sinclair. Not because of what you have or have not done, but because He *made* you." He paused. The air around them was still and silent, as though it were listening, too. "Do you know what Jesus said while He was on the cross?"

Frederick sighed forcefully through his nose as he placed his hands on his hips. He shook his head silently, his gaze low to avoid meeting Paulson's.

"Jesus hung there, in dreadful agony," Paulson said. "He had been beaten, whipped, pierced with thorns, and he was nailed there, struggling to breathe, watching as the men who had beaten him were

now gambling for his robe right in front of him. Do you know what He said, Sinclair? He said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” Paulson frowned and smiled simultaneously. “Did you hear that? The people who had given him an unfair trial, who had scourged him with shards of pottery and with nails tied into their whips . . . the people who were quite happily *killing* him at that very moment . . . He had compassion on them and sought to show them mercy. His unyielding desire was that they be forgiven.”

Frederick’s gaze remained fixed on the ground, his thoughts speeding and flailing in rapid succession.

“That is why I say, Sinclair,” continued Paulson, his voice filled with tenderness, “it does not matter how badly you have sinned. Jesus offers forgiveness to *all*. You see, the soldiers killed Him, but it had all been planned in advance by God. His word speaks of atonement, and how, without the shedding of blood, there can be no remission of sins. So God sent Jesus, His perfect Son, to shed His blood for you and for me, so that we could have that atonement, so that our sins could be swept away.” He paused. “Jesus died on that cross. But He did not stay dead. No. He rose again, forever proving His authority over death, and over life. Offering forgiveness, and atonement. He is our only hope, Sinclair. He is anyone’s only hope. Barrington knew that. And you speak of the weight of guilt that has cloaked you all these years . . . The Lord took that guilt, Sinclair. He took it upon Himself while He was hanging on that cross, so that the moment you repent and place your faith in Him and what He has accomplished, you will bear it no longer.”

Frederick’s chin trembled. He fought to steady it, clenching his teeth so tightly that they ached like the lump in his throat.

“You will be forgiven, Sinclair. Free,” said Paulson, peace filling his countenance. “No longer burdened down with guilt and regret.”

Frederick looked up at the man, stiffening his jaw as he spoke, seeking to conceal its tremors. “But what of the pain that I have caused? The destruction. I cannot undo any of that. I cannot uncripple my wife!”

Paulson’s clear blue eyes were filled with compassion. “You cannot undo that, no. But God can give you the strength that you need to heal, and to help your wife heal. He is a God of restoration, Sinclair. Of renewal. Of new life. And of joy, where there was once only sorrow. He will help you — and your wife — work through it all.”

Frederick sighed, his heart and mind at war. Could it be true?

Could any of it — could *all* of it — be true?

“You need Him, Sinclair. You cannot obtain peace, or healing, or atonement anywhere else. Those are found only in Him.” Paulson smiled gently. “You need only Him.”

Frederick stared silently at the ground, scenes of the past flowing through his mind like a river. The bouncing gig. The panicked horse. The unexpected carriage. Beryl on their wedding day. Her beautiful smile. The serene expression that lit her countenance as she painted. The horror in her eyes at his ghastly revelation.

“Come, let us try to get some sleep, eh?” Paulson clapped a warm hand on Frederick’s back, dispersing the distressing images like a mist.

As the two parted to return to their bases, Paulson turned to Frederick.

“He loves you, Sinclair. And He is ready and willing to forgive you and make you new. All you have to do is ask.”

Frederick watched Paulson as he walked away. He cast his eyes up at the starry expanse that stretched wide above him. The patches of white and hazy purple seemed to flash and shimmer against the backdrop of inky darkness.

Could it really be true?

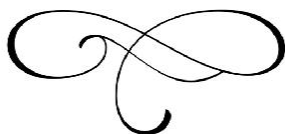
Could the God who created the stars have taken all of Frederick’s sin and guilt upon His own innocent shoulders?

Frederick sighed — a heavy, weary sigh.

Forgiveness seemed as distant as the stars after everything he had done. And even if God *could* forgive him, he didn’t know if he’d be able to forgive himself for hurting Beryl in so many ways.

He knew one thing, though.

He’d never wanted to believe anything more than he wanted to believe that atonement and hope might truly be possible.



BERYL ABSENT-MINDEDLY flipped through the well-worn pages of her Bible. She'd skipped breakfast, written to Frederick's parents to inform them of his departure, tried to eat lunch, and eventually realised that the heavy ache she had carried around in her heart all day could only be relieved by spending time with God.

Yet the emptiness that filled her rendered her mind blank.

"Please, Lord, help my mind to be clear again," she prayed aloud. "I feel as though a fog has settled all around me so that I cannot think, or even feel. Please, help me to know what I ought to do, to know what I ought to believe."

She sighed, releasing a small measure of the frustration that gripped her. "I know that I believe in *You*, and I trust in Your word. But I do not know how to move past this hideous truth, Lord. How can I forgive Frederick? All these years, all the pain and the suffering — it was his doing! Please, show me what to do."

Beryl's face crumpled. "I trusted him. I was so grateful for our new circumstances, but now? I feel so conflicted. I care about him — I do. I cannot deny that. But I feel betrayed, Lord. I know it was an accident. I know that he did not know me, and that he did not intend to cause any pain or harm that night, but I feel as though the trust and affection that was growing between us has been shattered."

She paused.

"Please, show me something in Your word to which I can cling. Show me something that will guide me — that will help me to heal from this pain that tears my heart."

With a weary sigh, she flipped through a few more pages, coming to rest in the book of Matthew.

She read through chapter twenty-six, reading of Judas, and how he betrayed the Lord.

As she reached one of the verses, a particular word seemed to leap out at her.

"Friend?" she said aloud in surprise.

Surely not . . . She must have missed something.

She skimmed over the verses again, bewilderment creasing her forehead as she pulled her Bible closer to examine it more clearly.

But she had not misunderstood.

There, in black and white, she could see where Judas had been singled out as the one who would betray Jesus, where he had been seeking an opportunity to betray Him for money.

She'd read of the moment where Jesus revealed His knowledge of who it was who would betray Him, and when Judas asked along with the other disciples, 'Surely not I?'

After telling the disciples that He was about to shed His blood for the remission of their sins, and that they would be scattered that very night, Jesus prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, His soul sorrowful unto death as he pleaded with His Father for the cup to pass from Him.

The disciples fell asleep, leaving Him alone in His distress.

And when Judas appeared with a crowd of angry people carrying swords and weapons, ready and willing to betray Jesus with a kiss . . .

Jesus still called him 'Friend'.

Beryl read the verse aloud, still struggling to believe that she had read it correctly.

"And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus and took him."

Beryl's eyes lingered on the words before her.

Jesus had known that Judas would betray him — He'd known that the kiss He had been given was not one of genuine friendship.

He'd known that Judas had handed Him over for money — and a paltry amount at that.

Yet, Jesus had still addressed the man as 'Friend'.

Nausea bubbled up within Beryl. Her breathing grew shallow and fast as the implications swirled in her mind.

Judas had *tried* to deceive Jesus.

He had *willingly* betrayed Jesus.

Yet not only had Jesus still faced him, He had addressed him as 'Friend'.

Beryl swallowed hard. A pang of sorrow slid through her heart as she pictured Frederick.

Where was he now? What was he doing?

Her heart thudded.

Was he safe?

Beryl's head dipped as her shoulders sank.

Frederick had not intentionally betrayed her.

He had not sought to cause her any harm.

So, if Jesus could still call Judas a friend, after all the evil that Judas had *purposefully* done to Him, surely she could still pursue a friendship — a relationship, even — with Frederick.

It *had* been an accident, after all.

And Beryl had no doubt that, if it were possible, Frederick would readily go back and undo everything that had happened. Hadn't he even said so himself in his letter?

Beryl's heart lurched. She had let him go without even seeing him. What must he think?

Surely he must believe that she hated him now.

In that moment, realisation dawned.

As betrayed and devastated as she had been by the shocking revelation, she could truly say that she had never once thought of Frederick with any hatred.

In fact, the truth had been all the more hurtful because of how highly she thought of him.

Grief echoed within her.

Why was it all only dawning on her now — now that it might be too late?

Sorrow overwhelmed her. Beryl sank to her knees at the side of her bed, trying to force the awareness of her physical discomfort out of her mind.

"Lord, I know that You are in control. I know that if You are able to show kindness to someone who *wilfully* betrayed You, then You can help me to show kindness to someone who hurt me by accident. You have made it clear before, Lord, that our sufferings magnify Your strength. Oh, I need Your strength! I cannot do this alone. My heart aches to think of Frederick, surrounded by danger, yet all alone without faith in You. I feel so hurt, and even angry that it was he who caused the accident. Why did it have to be him? But, please, help me to show kindness to him, and let him know that I do not hate him. Please protect him on the battlefields — please do not let any harm come to him, Lord. Please show me what I can do . . . Oh, do not let it be too late!"

Tears rolled silently down her face.

Beryl remained where she was for what seemed a long time, resting her head against the bed, her weary eyes closed as her heart churned with conflicting emotions.

A while later, a knock at the door roused her.

Beryl lifted her head, momentarily disoriented, then wiped her eyes and cheeks with her fingers.

She pulled herself up to sit in a nearby chair, her hip stiff and achy.

"Come in," she called out, wiping her cheek again as she sniffed, hoping that whoever it was would not notice the evidence of her sorrow.

Millie bustled in. "Ma'am, there is—" She stopped mid-sentence as her eyes met Beryl's. "Are you all right, ma'am?" she asked.

Beryl cleared her throat quietly. "Yes, I am fine." The shuddering breath that followed her words highlighted how untrue they were.

"There is a Mrs. Fortescue here to see you, ma'am. Swift asked me to find out if you wish for him to show her into the drawing room, or if he should tell her that you are not available to company at present."

Beryl's eyes widened. She had forgotten that Mrs. Fortescue had extended an invitation for Beryl to visit her, and after the embarrassment of the last evening they were together, she had presumed the offer no longer stood.

She certainly hadn't expected Mrs. Fortescue to visit *her* instead.

Beryl quietly debated which answer she ought to give.

She was so weary. Much too tired to endeavour to uphold a veneer of social pleasantries and trivial conversation. Yet, she did not wish to appear rude, especially considering the awkwardness of her previous encounter with Mrs. Fortescue.

Perhaps, too, the company would be a welcome distraction from her melancholy.

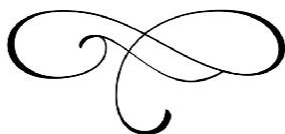
"No, I shall see her. Could you ask Swift to show her to the drawing room, please, Millie? And we should have a tray brought."

"Of course, ma'am. Right away," said Millie, bustling out of the room.

Beryl stood, smoothing her skirts.

Please, Lord, help me. And help Frederick . . .

Please let him turn to You.



"MRS. SINCLAIR, you have quite a delightful drawing room," said Mrs. Fortescue with a smile.

"Thank you," said Beryl. Silence fell upon her as she followed her guest's gaze.

Frederick had arranged everything in the room. He had organised and procured all of the furnishings himself before the wedding.

He'd since given Beryl free rein to make any changes that she wished, but he had done such a marvellous job that she thought it was a very pleasant room, herself.

"Are you surprised to see me?" Mrs. Fortescue asked rather boldly, settling herself in one of the armchairs.

"I am, quite!" said Beryl, instantly questioning whether or not she ought to have admitted it so freely.

"Well, I wished to see you to ascertain that all was well after your . . . *trip* last week."

Beryl gave a faint smile, embarrassment plucking at her. "Yes, I am perfectly fine, thank you."

How weak Mrs. Fortescue must think her. Beryl couldn't believe the woman had even deigned to visit.

"I am glad to hear it," said Mrs. Fortescue. "I was rather expecting to see you at the ball two nights ago — the one the Fotheringtons were hosting. Were you not there? Or perhaps you were, only I did not see you." She curled her lips in contempt. "Everyone was crammed in." She shook her head. "Lady Mulberry's new gown was frightfully crushed."

"I was not there," mumbled Beryl, distracted by the images of Frederick that constantly passed through her mind — of that horrible evening, of him stalking through enemy territory with the other soldiers, of the way he'd looked at her by the painting room window.

She tried to steel herself, to concentrate on Mrs. Fortescue's visit.

"But, why ever not, Mrs. Sinclair? Surely you must have been invited."

"I . . ." said Beryl.

Mrs. Fortescue's eyes narrowed, her head tilting to one side. "Are you ill?" she asked. "You seem rather pale . . ."

Beryl swallowed hard. "I am not ill."

Mrs. Fortescue studied her. After a few moments her gaze transformed into one of understanding. "You are sorrowful about something." She softened her voice and expression. "I should be only too glad to listen, if it would aid you to speak of it."

"Thank you," Beryl said quietly. "In truth, I am a little preoccupied." She paused. "Frederick . . . had to leave. He was recalled to his regiment."

Mrs. Fortescue's eyebrows shot up her forehead. "Oh! Oh, I *am* sorry. That must be unpleasant for you, especially at such an early stage in your marriage."

"Yes," said Beryl.

She studied Mrs. Fortescue, wondering how much of what she might tell her would stay within the walls of this room, and how much might make its way through society, travelling on the tongues of strangers.

"We . . . Well, when he left, we . . . We were not on very good terms with one another." Beryl gave a bitter laugh. "I wish we had been. For now, I wish to tell him something, but he is gone." She shrugged helplessly.

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Fortescue. "You had a disagreement?"

Shaking her head, Beryl scrunched up her face. "I discovered something . . ."

Beryl hesitated. Should she tell her?

Should she bare her soul to this woman who was, in all effect, a stranger?

If she did not, who else was there to speak to about it all?

"My limp," Beryl blurted out. "It was caused by an accident. I was in a carriage . . . five years ago. And . . . circumstances conspired to cause the carriage to topple over. Two other people died, but I survived. Alive . . . but permanently crippled."

Mrs. Fortescue looked as though she had just witnessed something impossible. Slowly, her shocked expression gave way to concern. "I am so sorry, Mrs. Sinclair. I had no idea. How horrid . . ." She shook her head slowly.

Beryl nodded, her head tucked low.

Silence stretched through the room. A few moments later, Mrs. Fortescue broke it with a delicate cough. "I am afraid, though, I do not understand how that relates to what you were telling me about you and your husband."

Beryl swallowed a few times in a row, struggling not to choke on the dryness that seemed to have swept in and taken her mouth and throat hostage.

"The accident was caused by a gig. It was speeding, and the horses spooked. I . . . I discovered very recently that . . . that Frederick—"

Beryl's voice cracked as she spoke his name. "Frederick and his friend were driving the gig. They had been drinking and—" A sob burst out. "And—"

Mrs. Fortescue raised both of her hands to cover her mouth, her hazel eyes wide with alarm. "You mean to tell me that the reason you are crippled . . . is because of your *husband*?"

Defensiveness reared up within Beryl at hearing it said aloud so plainly. "It was an *accident*. It was not on purpose."

"Of course not, of course not . . . but *still* . . ." Mrs. Fortescue sighed, a grave expression on her face. "That cannot make it any easier." Incredulity swiftly altered her features. "Why, I would be *outraged* if I were you!"

Beryl shook her head slightly. "I admit I have been many things since it came to light. I have been angry . . . I have felt utterly betrayed. But Frederick has been every bit as tormented by it all as I have these past five years. It has destroyed him. And now . . . Now, I fear that he believes that I could never forgive him."

"And . . . well, *could* you?" asked Mrs. Fortescue.

As Beryl stared at the gaping woman, faith stirred deep within her. "With God's help, I believe I can."

Mrs. Fortescue sat silent, her expression awash with the gravity of the situation.

"But I fear that I am too late now . . . to let him know," said Beryl in a mournful tone.

Mrs. Fortescue looked up at Beryl, a new expression in her eyes. "Did you and he marry for love?"

Beryl raised her eyebrows. "No. Our parents arranged it all. I did not even meet him until our wedding day."

Mrs. Fortescue's eyebrows flickered in surprise. She nodded. "And, are you happy with their choice? Or, were you, at least, before all of this?"

Beryl sighed. "Yes. I have not known Frederick for very long, but he is a wonderful man. He is so kind, and caring. So thoughtful and compassionate." Her voice cracked again as fresh tears filled her eyes.

Mrs. Fortescue's lips curled slightly. "You love him." She leaned her head forward slightly. "Even after all that you have learned?"

Beryl's heart fluttered and pounded as she remembered the kiss she and Frederick had shared. "I do." She cast her gaze sideways toward the fireplace. "Before all of this, everything was going so well. We were getting to know one another . . . I believe we had each developed a fondness for one another." She released a long, shuddering breath. "I had dared to believe that the two of us might be happy together, and that — in time — we would fall completely in love."

Sadness seemed to cloak Mrs. Fortescue's face for a moment. She looked down, and just as Beryl was about to ask her if everything was all right, she looked up again, fixing her melancholy gaze upon Beryl.

"Mr. Fortescue and I . . . We did not marry for love." She shook her head, her earrings sparkling as the light caught their movement. "My childhood sweetheart — the one I *would* have married — died before we could. Mr. Fortescue, too, lost the girl who had been *his* first choice." She shrugged. "And so, the two of us married in order to get what we needed out of life in the arrangement — security. And, I suppose, a form of companionship due to our mutual understanding of losing one's true love."

Beryl's heart squeezed with compassion. She had always thought that to marry with no possibility of love would be worse than not to marry at all.

Mrs. Fortescue fixed her eyes on Beryl's, a steely determination masking her deep-seated grief. "You have a chance for something real, Beryl. Something true. You are already married to the one that you love. Do not hold that lightly. I know the pain of losing your friend must be vast. And your injury is a permanent reminder of that pain — and, indeed, a source of pain itself! But if you allow all of that pain to ruin your chance at true love, I believe — I *know* — that the agony of doing so will be much greater than any that you have experienced thus far."

Beryl's stomach sank as her heart lurched.

Mrs. Fortescue was right. Beryl knew she was right.

Tears sprang to Beryl's eyes. "But how? I do love him. I do want to find a way past all this. But, how can I trust him? How can I truly forgive him?"

"Only God can help you with that, I am afraid. But you said yourself — He *can* help." Mrs. Fortescue shook her head, a wistful look filling her face. "Perhaps there is no way past it all. I have found, oftentimes, that the way is often *through*, not around. You may not be able to move past it, but you *can* work through it. And no matter what the cost of doing so might be, the cost of refusing to do so will be much greater than any sorrow you can imagine."

Beryl thought of various Scriptures she had repeatedly turned to for comfort. As her mind revisited them, an awareness seemed to fill her.

A dawning realisation.

Beryl jerked her head upward and stared at Mrs. Fortescue. "I must *do* it."

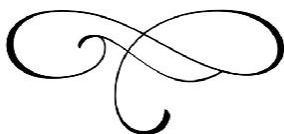
Mrs. Fortescue sat unfazed. "Yes, you must," she nodded.

"No . . . I must *do* it. I must take *action*. Endeavour to carry it out. You are right, Mrs. Fortescue, I cannot go past it or around it — I must

go *through* it. And as I do, the Lord will meet me in whatever circumstances arise. And He will give me the strength that I need to see them through.”

Mrs. Fortescue smiled proudly. “I believe you have just taken the first step, Mrs. Sinclair.” She paused. “And, please — you may call me Eliza.”

Mrs. Fortescue leaned forward, a smile sparkling in her eyes. “Now, I do believe I may have an idea that will aid you in taking the second step . . .”



“TALBOT!”

Frederick’s voice was muffled as it emerged in the din of musket fire and racing footsteps. All around him, voices shouted and screamed. Frantically, he scanned the battlefield around him, pleading inwardly that Talbot would still be standing.

But there was no sign of him.

The smoke was beginning to clear, at least. Another skirmish that had pushed the enemy back a little more.

Beryl flashed into Frederick’s mind. His heart flooded with grief as he thought of her alone in their home.

She was probably glad that he was gone, though. And he certainly couldn’t blame her for that.

“Sinclair!”

The weary voice pulled Frederick out of his thoughts.

“Talbot?”

“Sinclair!”

Frederick whipped his head from side to side, seeking to ascertain from whence the weak voice had come.

A booted leg lay jutting out from behind a mound of earth.

“Talbot!” Frederick rushed toward the leg. As the rest of the soldier came into view, Frederick stopped abruptly.

It had been a long time since he’d seen a man so pale.

Talbot lay crumpled on the ground, blood trickling down the side of his face. He tried to push himself up on one elbow, but his arm was too weak to hold his own weight.

“Sinclair . . .”

Frederick knelt down beside him, casting a careful glance around to make sure danger wasn’t close enough to seize them unawares.

“Talbot . . . Do not worry. We shall—”

“Sinclair . . . tell my wife—” The man’s face scrunched up. “Tell my wife how much I love her . . .” Tears rolled from Talbot’s eyes, mingling with the blood that tracked down his cheek. “. . . and that I shall be waiting for her at the Lord’s feet.”

Frederick swallowed hard. He wanted to reassure Talbot that he could tell her himself.

But as he looked at his old friend, he could almost see the man’s

life ebbing away.

"I shall," Frederick whispered. "I promise I shall."

Talbot's eyes closed in relief as he drew a laboured breath.

Frederick fought to keep a tight rein on his emotions as he noticed Talbot's chest cease to rise again.

He exhaled sharply, pain roiling in his heart.

Gone.

In an instant.

Just like Barrington.

Just like the people in Beryl's carriage.

A new thought pushed into Frederick's mind as he cast a glance at Talbot's pale, still face.

Where was Talbot now?

Was he really with the Lord? Was everything that Paulson had said true?

Frederick wearily pushed himself to a stand.

And what about *him*? If he had been the one lying there, where would he be now?

A shudder worked its way up his spine. He knew the answer all too well.

He knew something else, too.

He would deserve every agonising moment of it.

As Frederick trudged around, seeking to locate other members of his regiment, he found himself doing something that he couldn't remember attempting to do for a very long time.

"God, if You can hear me . . ." He paused. "If what Paulson said is true, then please . . . show me. I know what I deserve, and what I do not. I know that I can never deserve Your forgiveness. But Paulson seems to think that You would be willing to extend it to me anyway. If he is right, then please let me know. Somehow."

Frederick sighed wearily. It seemed so out of reach to hope that he could ever be forgiven after all that he had done.

That God would even listen to a prayer from someone so unworthy.

Back at his quarters that evening, he declined to join the others as they ate and drank. Instead, he headed straight for his room, longing for some time alone.

Talbot was gone.

Who would be next?

Frederick flopped down onto his bed, achy and drained from the day's demanding activities. He stretched out along the length of it.

He shuffled and squirmed.

Something hard seemed to dig into his back.

He sat up for a moment, grumpy at the interruption of his rest.

Moving his blanket back, he saw a small, black book which had been placed neatly just below his pillow.

Frederick jerked his head back in surprise, then leaned forward, snatching the book up in his hand.

It was . . . a Bible?

Paulson. He must have left it here somehow.

Frederick sat motionless with the Bible in his hands, a strange yet almost comforting sensation filling his heart and mind.

Could God be trying to show him that what Paulson had said was really true?

He quickly tried to dismiss the thought, although he found that he could not disregard it entirely.

Slowly, he reclined once again and began flicking through the pages of his unexpected gift.

There were so many chapters and pages and individual books within the binding that he didn't even know where to start, nor did he know how he could ever succeed in reading through all of it.

He skimmed over a few verses in the Psalms, surprised to discover that he could relate to the warfare terminology and the author's cries for deliverance from enemies encamped all around him.

He skimmed through verses that he didn't quite understand in some of the other pages, then his eyes fixed on a familiar name as he reached the latter part of the book.

Jesus.

Paulson had spoken about Jesus a lot.

Frederick started to read, finding the current book easier to understand. It almost seemed as though he were reading some kind of report — or even a diary.

Sure enough, Jesus spoke of sin, of forgiveness — of hope.

He recognised a number of phrases that Paulson had mentioned, and with each line Frederick read, a yearning intensified within him to read more.

His breathing stilled as he came upon one verse in particular.

'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.'

His heart thudded as he remembered Paulson telling him about that verse.

It was true . . .

Jesus really *had* prayed with compassion for the soldiers who had been killing Him.

The air around Frederick seemed to grow warm and heavy as he remembered his own prayer not long before.

Had God really answered it?

Could God truly care about him after all that he had done?

In one smooth motion, Frederick sank onto his knees, barely noticing the hard, rough floor beneath him.

His limbs trembled as involuntarily as his voice.

“God . . . are You there? Can all this be true?”

His breath shuddered.

“I asked You to show me if everything that Paulson said was true . . . And then — this! Surely this cannot be a coincidence . . .”

Guilt rooted his eyes closed.

“I . . . I have done terrible things, God. Dreadful things. I have taken lives and destroyed others. I have behaved recklessly and irresponsibly, and I know that there is no one but myself to blame.”

Tears drifted from his eyes, snaking down his cheeks and dripping onto the floor.

His voice choked with emotion.

“I need You, God. I need Your atonement, Your forgiveness. I know that I do not deserve it. I know that. But I beg You — please forgive me for all the wrong that I have done. Please save me, and take away my guilt and shame, all the torment of my wrongdoing.”

He curled low to the ground, speaking aloud in anguish.

“I am sorry, God. I am so sorry . . .” Sobbing silenced his words for a moment. “I do not want to be so foolish and so selfish ever again. I want to do whatever You want me to do. Please, forgive me. Please take this weight of torment from me. I cannot go on like this anymore! I cannot live apart from You anymore. Paulson was right . . . Beryl was right. You are my only hope, Lord. Please forgive me . . . please . . .”

Silently, he wept. Moments passed before he spoke again.

“Thank You that Jesus died for me. Thank You that He offers me forgiveness through the blood that He shed. Thank You that You are willing to extend that forgiveness even to me. I will gladly receive it, Lord. I need You. Please, have mercy on me.”

Frederick glanced around in stunned silence, without really seeing any of his surroundings.

All that he noticed was something different that seemed to be stirring within him.

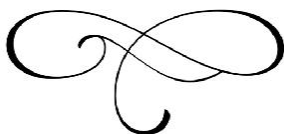
Something new.

“I believe, God. It is all true! I believe that Jesus died for me. I believe that, despite all the wrong that I have done, that You *are* willing to forgive me. I know that You are the only one who can. Please have mercy on me, Lord . . . Please save me . . .”

Frederick pressed his forehead against the ground as all of the tears that he had bottled up for the past five years came rushing out.

After a long, accusation-free silence, for the first time that he could remember, he felt as though he could breathe.

That the weight, which had for years bound him and crushed him, had finally begun to lift.



ONE OF THE footmen strode into the drawing room and bowed. "Mrs. Fortescue to see you, ma'am."

"Thank you, Swift." Beryl placed her embroidery work aside and smoothed her skirts. The footman nodded and left.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sinclair," called Mrs. Fortescue in her sing-song tone as she sashayed into the room.

"Good morning, Mrs. Fortescue," replied Beryl, anxious to hear the results of their agreed-upon scheme.

Mrs. Fortescue plopped down onto the sofa close to Beryl. "Well! I spoke to Mr. Fortescue, and I asked him if he knew of any possible way that Colonel Fitzherbert might be able to convey a letter to the front when he returns there next week."

Beryl held her breath, desperately trying to read her companion's expression for any tell-tale clue of how the conversation had gone.

"At once, he assured me that he had no idea and could not think of any reason why he should presume upon the man to even ask. But — and I do hope you do not mind — I then informed him that your husband had been sent there and that the two of you — only recently married, mind! — had not even had a chance to bid one another adieu! Well, this was the first successful pluck at Mr. Fortescue's compassion, but, still, it was not enough for him to agree to approach someone as . . . *traditional*, shall we say, as Colonel Fitzherbert."

Beryl's hope faded, though she reminded herself that if there was anyone who could convince anyone else of *anything*, it was the flamboyant lady seated right beside her.

"So . . . I had to tell him everything. Oh, but do not worry, Mrs. Sinclair — he is not a man given to idle gossip. In truth, in all the time that we have been married, I suppose not even one volume could be filled with the few words he has ventured to speak!"

Beryl suppressed a smile. The same could not be said of Mrs. Fortescue, she was sure.

"Well, when I told him the particulars of the situation, his face turned as pale as syllabub! Indeed, he seemed heavily affected by it for quite a while afterward. And, so, when I repeated my request that he convey a letter to Colonel Fitzherbert for you, he said he would speak to him at once!"

Beryl's eyes widened. "Really? And has he spoken with him?"

Mrs. Fortescue sighed dramatically. "He has. He went to White's the very next morning. I believe he would have gone immediately had I not been telling him so late at night, you see. However, he went straight to White's as soon as he could. And the poor thing was distraught when he found Colonel Fitzherbert's usual spot empty. Mr. Fortescue wondered for a moment if he had already missed the dignified gentleman's departure to the front. But, as Providence would have it, Mr. Fortescue was just about to leave, when who blustered into the foyer, but Colonel Fitzherbert himself! And — after allowing him time to divest himself of his outer clothes and settle in his preferred place, of course — Mr. Fortescue soon broached the matter with all the grace and courage he could muster, poor soul."

Beryl raised her eyebrows expectantly, her heart clamouring. "And? What did the Colonel say?"

Mrs. Fortescue's animated countenance softened into a sincere, grateful smile. "He said he would take the letter. And that he would do his best to ensure that it would reach Mr. Sinclair."

The giddiness of relief made Beryl's head light for a moment. "Oh! Oh, Eliza!" She launched forward, embracing her helpful friend, who returned the gesture with a supportive squeeze.

"Truly, I cannot thank you enough," said Beryl. "Nor *Mr.* Fortescue . . . Oh, please do express my deepest gratitude to him. And, indeed, to the Colonel! Oh, I am so relieved," she said, punctuating her words with a sigh.

Mrs. Fortescue smiled again and rubbed Beryl's arm lightly. "Well, now. It is your turn to make haste — and make ready the letter!"

Beryl nodded, looking at her hands. "I did begin it. But then, I could not stop thinking that the Colonel would say no. And so, I could not bring myself to finish it." She looked up at Mrs. Fortescue, her face brightening. "But I shall finish it now, without delay."

"Indeed you shall, for I am not leaving this house until I am carrying the letter in my own hand. Colonel Fitzherbert intends to leave imminently, and we have only enough time for you to write the letter and entrust it to me today, so that I may give it to Mr. Fortescue, so that he can pass it along to Colonel Fitzherbert first thing in the morning!" She sighed vocally, as if to signify her overwhelm at the hectic schedule that lay before them.

"I shall finish it presently, then. Please, help yourself to some tea. I shall have some brought in for you."

"Indeed, and I do hope there is cake, after all my exertions . . ." Mrs. Fortescue smiled, her eyes twinkling in jest.

Beryl smiled. "I do believe the cook made a fresh Dutch cake only this morning."

She hastily made her way toward her painting room. Retrieving the paper she had tucked away inside one of her books, she smoothed it out on her lap and read over the few words she had already attempted to write.

Dear Frederick,

I wanted you to know that I am praying for you. I am sorry that we did not see each other before you left. Had I known that you were leaving so swiftly, I would have come down sooner.

BERYL BIT her lip as she wondered whether or not to start anew.

With a sigh, she crumpled the paper in her hands. Why was it so hard to know what to say now that she had an opportunity to say it?

She slipped out of the room and walked slowly toward Frederick's study. It was still painful to look upon, especially given the swiftness of his departure.

Beryl sat down at her husband's desk. After placing a fresh leaf of paper upon it, she snatched up the quill, feeling close to Frederick momentarily as she placed her fingers around it, where his would have been before.

Please, Lord, give me the right words to say . . .

Beryl tried formulating sentence after sentence in her mind as she stared absent-mindedly out of the window, the quill in her hand hovering over the blank page below.

With a sigh, she stood and walked toward the window. It was a cloudy day, though still rather bright.

Beryl stared at the white, puffy clouds and the small swathes of blue peeking through them. As she noticed how vast the expanse was above her, she was filled with an awareness of how small she was in comparison.

A little flock of birds dotted the sky, flying over the chimney tops in a uniform direction.

Beryl sighed. If only she were like a bird, able to fly to Frederick's side.

How deeply she wished that she could speak to him face to face. That they could have a conversation involving the two of them, rather than merely presenting her own side of things to him.

If she *were* a bird, she could soar above all of the gloom. She would be free to live unconstrained by the trappings of unalterable circumstances.

She would feel the wind's refreshing caress as she glided away from all her sorrows.

Guilt plucked at her heart.

She didn't need to be a bird to find respite and refreshment. Didn't God's word tell her that He would give her the strength to soar like an eagle if only she would wait on Him, and trust Him?

Mumbling a prayer that was a blend of apology and gratitude, she seated herself once again at the desk. Picking up the quill a second time, she closed her eyes and pictured Frederick.

What would she say if she *were* face to face with him?

Beryl opened her eyes and fixed them on the sheet of blank paper. Soon, the scratching sounds of the quill's nib filled the silent room.

Dear Frederick,

I do hope that this letter finds you safe and well. I am sorry that I did not see you before your hasty departure. As soon as I read your letter, I went downstairs to see you, but you had already gone. I feel terrible that I did not have the chance to bid you farewell, or to let you know that I would miss you.

Frederick, I know that what happened all those years ago was an accident, and I am trusting that, when you return, God will help us work through it. Together.

Forgive me for hiding away those few days. I confess, I did not know what to do. In truth, I did not think that I could bear it. But you are my husband, and I know that, deep down, you are a kind and honest man.

How can I hold something against you that grieves you as much as it grieves me? You did not intend to cause any harm that night. And I know that, if it were in your power to change it, you would, without question, and without delay.

Oh, Frederick — truly, your letter frightened me. It seemed that you were writing without any expectation or hope of returning. I desperately hope that is not the case.

I know you have been as tormented as I have been these past years. Perhaps, God has joined us together so that we might help each other to heal. To move forward into a new future of hope and — perhaps, in time — love.

I shall daily pray for your safety, and for your salvation.

You have my forgiveness, but the forgiveness that you need most can only come from God. The past will only continue to shackle you until you surrender it fully to Him.

I trust that God will be with you where you are, and will watch over you.

Be careful there, Frederick. Come home.

Come home to me.

With love and fondness,

Your wife,

Beryl

HOPE STIRRED within her as she read through it one last time before folding and sealing it.

She took special care as she wrote Frederick's name on the front of it, and the meagre details that she knew regarding his regiment.

After a few silent moments of holding the letter and staring at it, Beryl slowly stood.

As she left the study, she remembered the urgency with which Mrs. Fortescue had indicated the letter must be exchanged, so she quickened her pace as much as she could toward the drawing room.

"The best Dutch cake I believe I have ever tasted! And I assure you, I have tasted my fair share," Mrs. Fortescue said, a smirk playing on her lips.

"I am glad to hear it," said Beryl. Her grip on the letter tightened upon entering the drawing room and seeing her new friend. She wasn't sure why.

"All finished?" asked Mrs. Fortescue, dabbing at her immaculate lips with a napkin.

"Yes."

"Splendid!" Mrs. Fortescue reached out an elegant hand toward Beryl, looking as though she were in a play, about to burst into a melodramatic monologue.

Beryl held onto the letter, her grip tightening even more.

"Is everything all right?" asked Mrs. Fortescue, her hand suspended and beginning to waver.

"Yes," said Beryl with a smile, trying desperately to dismiss her irrational sentiments. "I had not expected it to feel so . . . well, so much like surrender — giving the letter to you." She squeezed the letter with both hands, then closed her eyes as she handed it to Mrs. Fortescue.

As the paper slid from between her fingers, the same sensation of loneliness that had overtaken her the day Frederick left wrapped around her again.

"Oh, poor soul," mused Mrs. Fortescue. "Look at it this way, however — he cannot receive it if you do not send it. And he cannot respond if he does not receive it."

Mrs. Fortescue's cheery tone lent a small measure of comfort to Beryl.

"You are right," said Beryl. She nodded slowly. "Of course."

Mrs. Fortescue bustled to a stand, placing a warm hand on Beryl's shoulder. "I shall away and give this to Mr. Fortescue at once. Then, tomorrow, you can be assured that he himself will convey it right into the capable hands of Colonel Fitzherbert, first thing in the morning."

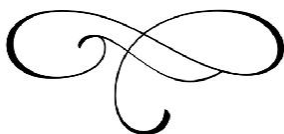
Beryl straightened. "Truly, I cannot thank you enough."

"Nonsense. What are friends for?" said Mrs. Fortescue, a

vulnerable look in her eyes breaking through her bubbly exterior.

Beryl weakly returned her smile, though for a moment a flush of relief washed through her heart.

She was so grateful to have a friend once again.



FREDERICK AWOKE the next morning half-expecting to see the familiar surroundings of his room at home in London. Instead, his eyes slowly adjusted to the dim interior of his garrison base.

He lay, still and sombre, as memories from the night before washed over him, one after another, after another.

Had he truly encountered God last night?

Was he really forgiven?

His chest, his shoulders — they were lighter. The guilty thoughts were still there, but they did not seem to have the same strangling grip they'd had before.

Beryl's face flashed into his mind, and an ache settled in his heart.

He longed to tell her everything — about Paulson, about the Bible, about the peace that had engulfed him as he'd cried out to God in repentance and faith. All of it he yearned to share with her.

Grief stung his throat.

Would *she* want to share any of it with him?

She was probably hoping that she would never see him again.

Gripping his hands together firmly, Frederick perched on the side of his bed and dipped his head.

"Lord, please comfort Beryl. Please help her to know how sorry I am," he prayed, his voice wavering. "Please . . . do not permit her to hate me . . . even though I deserve it."

In his heart, he knew that God had forgiven him.

Yet, the question remained — would Beryl?

"Please, Lord, help her to forgive me . . . If *You* can forgive me — You who are so far above all that we are and do — You who created the earth and everything in it, then nothing is impossible for You, as Your word says. You alone can heal hearts and change minds. Please, let Beryl forgive me, Lord."

As he set about readying himself for the day, his thoughts kept drifting back to his beautiful wife.

How he wished he could rush home to her and tell her everything that had happened.

And how he longed to know how she might respond.

It was a strange emotion, wondering if he would even be welcome in his own home.

But then, what if Beryl *could* forgive him? What bliss they might know!

Frederick smiled as he imagined the two of them laughing and enjoying life together. He pictured celebrations and consolations and every little bit of life in between.

His heart heard the echoes of children's laughter ringing through the halls and Beryl's sweet voice whispering her love for him in the quiet of night.

He wanted it all.

Still, there was an awareness that he deserved none of it.

But he wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything before.

And as he made his way outside, he thanked God for the sliver of hope that shone in his heart, telling him that it might not be as impossible as it once had seemed.



"ARE you sure that we should have come?"

"Why, of course! You are not the only lady here whose husband is at the front."

Mrs. Fortescue subtly pointed out various people in the crowd, but Beryl barely heard a word.

She couldn't remember why she had agreed to attend the party with Mrs. Fortescue after everything that had happened. All she wanted to do was remain at home and hide away from the rest of the world.

"... and I am sure you will have a splendid evening. You cannot imagine you would have been happy hiding away from everyone! We have done what we can. And now we must wait. And while we wait, there is no harm in enjoying a little culture."

Beryl just about stopped herself from rolling her eyes.

Culture was the last thing on her mind.

All she could think of was Frederick.

News from the front had not been plentiful, but the little she had heard had most definitely been unfavourable.

They'd all thought the war had been at an end, though Mrs. Fortescue had said that some of her husband's friends had not been fully surprised to learn that the troops had been recalled. Another chance at victory, they'd said.

But would it prove elusive this time, too?

Each time Beryl pictured Frederick in the midst of a battle, she felt as though she were standing on a precipice about to fall. And the thought that harm might come to him before amends could be made between them was all the more terrifying.

“Come, we may sit here,” said Mrs. Fortescue, settling herself in an empty chair and patting the one next to it.

Beryl wearily flopped down beside Mrs. Fortescue with a sigh.

“Really, Mrs. Sinclair! Would it cause your face to break if you were to fix a smile upon it?”

Beryl turned to face Mrs. Fortescue, startled by her words. But as she met her friend’s gaze, she noticed the playfulness with which her remark had been intended.

Mrs. Fortescue’s eyes crinkled as she chuckled. “Oh, come — we need not stay very long, but it is good for you. Nothing is more useful to a woman who is waiting than a pleasant distraction.”

Beryl shook her head gently and smiled. She was exceedingly glad of Mrs. Fortescue’s friendship. Even when it forced her outside of her own comfort.

The two women sat silently as they watched happy couples dancing. Soon, the two were partaking of tea and the plentiful mix of delicate morsels on offer. Perhaps, it had been a fine idea after all.

Later in the evening, just as Beryl was about to lean over to say something to Mrs. Fortescue, her gaze fell upon a gentleman standing at the other side of the room.

It was him.

It was the man whose presence had invoked such a strong reaction from Frederick.

Hatters — that was his name.

Trepidation filled Beryl’s heart as she observed the tall, confident man.

Frederick had not been the only one in the gig that night.

In fact, the man before her was the one to whom the gig had belonged. It had been due to his urgings that Frederick had even been involved.

Anger and revulsion bubbled within her.

Desperately reining in her emotions, she leaned sideways toward Mrs. Fortescue.

“Do you know that gentleman over there?” Beryl asked, motioning subtly with her head.

Mrs. Fortescue followed her friend’s gaze. “That tall man in the blue waistcoat?”

“Yes,” said Beryl, her insides churning.

“I do believe that is Mr . . . Oh . . . What is it?” Mrs. Fortescue tapped a slender finger on her lips. “Ah! Mr. Hattersley.”

Beryl frowned. Hattersley?

Hatters . . . That must have been Frederick’s nickname for him.

Memories of her childhood came rushing back to her.

Hattersley . . . She had known of a family by that name in

Lindenfell. In fact, Miss Jenkins had spoken very highly of one of the sons.

Beryl closed her eyes, grief flooding her heart.

How ironic it all was.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Sinclair?"

Beryl opened her eyes and fixed a melancholy gaze on her friend. "That is the man that Frederick knew. The one who owned the gig." Her throat burned as she whispered the unbearable facts.

Mrs. Fortescue placed her teacup into her saucer with a loud clink. "Oh! Are you sure?"

"Yes. We saw him one night. Frederick . . . he was so shaken."

"And are you, now?"

"In truth, I feel more sorrowful than shocked. Though, I must confess, I am rather angry. Look at him — he looks as though he does not have a care in the world! All this time, Frederick has been carrying the guilt and blame of it all, yet this man was the true instigator. And it would seem as though it has not affected him at all!"

Mrs. Fortescue nodded solemnly as she observed the man. "He does seem rather . . . carefree."

Beryl drew a deep breath and sighed. Hattersley stood next to another man, drinking and laughing as he watched the other guests dancing.

How could anyone cause what he had, yet care so little?

Beryl forced herself to shift her attention from him.

But the tea and treats that had shortly before tasted like exquisite delights seemed now only bland and burdensome.

"Perhaps we have enjoyed enough culture for one night," said Mrs. Fortescue, looking at Beryl with such deep sympathy that Beryl wanted to weep.

"Perhaps." Beryl glanced again at the place Hattersley had been, only to find him gone.

Good.

She earnestly hoped never to have to lay eyes on him again.

The two ladies walked slowly to the hall, where Mrs. Fortescue instructed a footman to fetch her carriage.

Beryl glanced around the hall as they waited, wishing that Frederick was by her side, not miles away in mortal danger.

Upon hearing that the carriage had been brought around, Beryl turned to follow Mrs. Fortescue.

Just beside the door stood Hatters and his friend.

They glanced over as Beryl approached them. Her cheeks flamed as she noticed Hatters fix his gaze on her limp.

Beryl's heart thundered as her rage toward him resurfaced. She kept walking, glancing up at him as she stepped beside him.

She stopped, her breathing shallow and furious.

He smiled and nodded at her, appearing every bit the picture of polite society.

"You noticed my limp, I saw," said Beryl firmly, her courage surprising even herself.

Mrs. Fortescue snapped her head around and gaped.

Beryl knew she was breaking the rules of tradition, speaking to a strange gentleman without being introduced.

She didn't care.

Surely there was some kind of rule against being entirely unconcerned after forever altering the lives of multiple people.

"I beg your pardon?" Hatters regarded her as though she were a dangerous insect.

"Do you? I do not believe you beg anyone's pardon, despite all that you have done."

Hatters emitted a scoffing sound and turned away.

"You do not wish to admit it, *Hatters*?" said Beryl, vaguely aware that people other than Mrs. Fortescue and Hattersley's friend had now stopped to witness the unorthodox encounter.

Hatters stopped and turned slowly. "What did you call me?"

"You heard me. Just as you heard the horse's whinny that night. Just as you heard the voice of your conscience urging you to be more careful. But you ignored it. And Miss Jenkins is *dead* because of you!"

Beryl's voice trembled as she spoke. "The coachman, too. They are both dead because of *you*! And the limp that you noticed I walk with? Mm," she said, nodding. "I have had it these five years since. By God's grace, *I* am not dead because of you, but your despicable and irresponsible actions that night changed my life forever."

She blinked away tears. "Frederick, at least, regrets his part in it. But you, Mr. Hattersley of Lindenfell, you seem wholly unconcerned about the role you played that night. And I confess, I do not understand how you can be responsible for two deaths and one life-altering injury yet show absolutely no remorse."

Hatters' face grew deathly pale. His eyes regarded her with deep shock and . . . was that fear?

Mrs. Fortescue placed a steady hand around Beryl's elbow as she glanced around at the small crowd that had gathered to witness the spectacle. "Come. You have said your piece." Her voice was warm and understanding.

Beryl trembled with indignation, barely hearing her friend.

She stared at Hatters, awaiting his response.

A low, strained sound met her ears as Hatters cleared his throat. "I believe you must have mistaken me for someone else, ma'am." His eyes narrowed with a cruel glint as he spoke.

Beryl's heartbeat thumped in her ears as the ground seemed to sway beneath her feet.

She watched, speechless, as Hatters turned and strode through the door, disappearing into the night. His flabbergasted friend cast Beryl a confused glance before turning in pursuit of him.

"Come," repeated Mrs. Fortescue, gently ushering Beryl outside.

Beryl frowned. "He . . ."

"I know . . . I know." Mrs. Fortescue's voice was softer than Beryl had ever heard it before.

"But, how—"

Mrs. Fortescue exhaled forcefully and shook her head, her long, delicate earrings swinging wildly. "He is a scoundrel. Plain and simple. There are many in this world. Though, that is little comfort to you, I know." She squeezed Beryl's elbow. "I am so sorry, Beryl."

Beryl quietly took her place in the carriage, her mind still reeling from her untoward exchange with Hatters.

How could someone so coldly deny causing such harm to others when they knew that they were guilty?

And be so boldfaced as to lie about it directly to one of the people whom they had hurt?

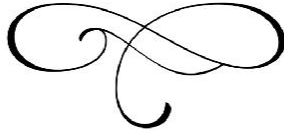
She could not fathom it.

But the whole experience had made one thing very clear.

Hatters and his callous denial only served to highlight the genuineness of Frederick's regret.

As Mrs. Fortescue rattled on in the background about how disagreeable Hatters truly was, Beryl rested her head on the cushion behind her and closed her eyes, thinking of Frederick.

And of the future she hoped they might yet share.



THE STEADY THRUM OF HORSES' hooves echoed Frederick's own heart.

Metallic clangs of swords and bayonets sliced through the air.

Men shouted, some in English, some in French — each one yelling with everything he had.

Step by step, Frederick, in the long line of other soldiers, marched forward.

Soon, he would have no choice but to engage. The soldiers up ahead were in the depths of conflict.

Mere moments from now, he would be, too.

A low, weighty boom shook the plain, followed by a few seconds of silence.

Then, the screams of agony began.

Cannonballs flew overhead in both directions as Frederick's breathing grew more shallow.

Sweat trickled down his collar.

It was time.

"Ready!" bellowed the captain.

Frederick positioned his musket facing forward.

"Aim!"

He looked ahead, training his eyes and aim on the French troops up ahead.

"Fire!"

Frederick squeezed the musket trigger, the power of the blast jerking his shoulder back.

Smoke stung his eyes as hundreds of muskets fired simultaneously. He coughed, his throat burning.

Drawing his sword from its scabbard, he readied himself to use it.

An enemy soldier approached him, waving his blade wildly in the air.

"Ah!" Frederick swung his weapon in a smooth arc, knocking the enemy's sword onto the battlefield.

As time moved on, and with each opponent he faced, Frederick's thoughts alternated between his immediate surroundings and Beryl's tear-streaked face.

He longed to see her, to hold her. To reassure her that he would

never do anything to hurt her ever again.

He offered a silent prayer to God as another soldier swung at him.

A prayer for Beryl. For himself.

For the future.

The once-pristine lines of infantrymen had fractured and diverged over the course of the day.

Smouldering heaps of bodies lay dotted across the landscape as small groups of men engaged in skirmishes filled the rest of it.

Frederick scanned his surroundings, seeking out a direction in which he would be most useful.

“Sinclair!”

Frederick whipped his head around in the direction of the voice.

Paulson. He was kneeling over a man lying on the ground.

Stanley? No . . .

With a frantic wave, Paulson beckoned Frederick toward him.

“Paulson . . .” said Frederick, his stomach churning as he caught sight of the bloody stump where Stanley’s leg once had been.

“See if you can find a coat or . . . any kind of material will do. What I have here is not enough,” Paulson said, shaking his head grimly, pressing all his weight on a seeping pool of blood at Stanley’s stomach.

Frederick fought the urge to vomit as he turned away, nodding.

He moved toward one of the piles of bodies, sinking to his knees as he started sifting through the fragments of fabric and flesh.

He pulled at a loose jacket, and as the movement disturbed the heap, a familiar face rolled into view.

“Reynolds . . .” said Frederick, disappointment and sorrow clouding his voice.

Hastily, he gathered up the jacket and raced back to Paulson and the injured Stanley.

“Here,” said Frederick, extending the jacket to Paulson.

“Thank you, Sinclair,” he replied, grabbing the jacket and bunching it up before pressing it down on the midsection of the now unconscious soldier.

Paulson shook his head. “It is not enough . . .”

“Here, take mine. I shall look for more.”

Before Paulson could respond, Frederick flung off his coat and tossed it toward Paulson before scampering away toward another heap of bodies.

In his mind, he knew it was a futile mission. Stanley had evidently lost too much blood.

Yet, with all his heart, Frederick longed to do anything he could to help save the man’s life.

He gathered another jacket and a few more scraps of fabric and

turned back.

As he approached Paulson and Stanley, he noticed an enemy soldier advancing toward Paulson from behind, out of the kneeling man's sightline.

The enemy drew his flintlock pistol.

"Paulson!" Frederick yelled, diving toward his new friend with the intent of knocking him out of the way.

As his hands met Paulson's shoulders and began to push, a searing hot pain tore through Frederick's shoulder and chest.

"Sinclair!" Paulson's voice sounded muffled and distant.

Swords clanged and smoke drifted.

A sharp, tearing sound was swiftly followed by a grunt and a thud.

"Sinclair?"

A pair of warm hands shook Frederick, driving the burning agony even deeper.

"Stay with me, Sinclair!"

Frederick could barely hear him.

He couldn't speak or move.

All he could do was see Beryl smiling, her kind eyes aglow with gentleness, her fiery hair shimmering in the light.

Realisation clawed at him as the silence around him grew more profound.

For the first time since the accident, he truly wanted to live.

He'd come here so intent on allowing an enemy's strike to find him, to give himself over to retribution, but now . . .

Now he truly had something to live for.

"Sinclair!"

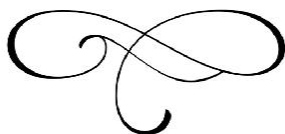
The voice seemed only a whisper now.

Every breath was a piercing agony.

"Sinc—"

The voice vanished, along with the image of Beryl.

Darkness enveloped him.



“OH!” Beryl exclaimed as she slapped her paintbrush down in frustration. Everything she tried to do today seemed only to end in a mess.

All she could think of was Frederick. Memories and imaginings of him were constant distractions from every task she attempted.

It had been weeks now since Colonel Fitzherbert had left for the front with Beryl’s letter in his possession. She knew there was a chance that it might not reach Frederick, but that hadn’t stopped her from praying and hoping that it would.

And with each day that had passed, she’d grown more and more hopeful, yet apprehensive, about receiving a response.

Not even painting could settle her mind this time.

Mrs. Fortescue had accompanied her to church on Sunday, and the clergyman had spoken of walking by faith, not by sight.

It had spurred Beryl on to hope that Frederick *would* receive the letter and reply to it. And to believe that there still might be hope of a future for them together when he returned.

Beryl rubbed her face in her hands, weary from lack of sleep, an issue that had plagued her since Frederick’s sudden departure.

Sometimes, she believed she might run mad — trapped as she was in an endless cycle of waiting and wondering.

She tried to compose her mind and heart, urging herself to be patient. She ought to give the painting another try.

Just as she lifted her brush, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she called out, expecting to see Millie bustle in. Instead, a footman entered, carrying a small, silver tray.

Beryl’s heart quickened as she noticed the paper on top of it. It was a letter.

Finally, it was a letter!

She almost forgot to say thank you as she snatched the letter up, and could barely wait until the footman left, such was her yearning to tear it open.

She glanced at its exterior, noticing an army insignia embossed in its seal.

It was really from Frederick.

Beryl closed her eyes and clasped it to her chest, silently thanking

God.

Mrs. Fortescue was due to arrive shortly. At last, Beryl would have good news to share with her.

She broke open the seal and unfolded the paper.

Immediately, she frowned. It was not Frederick's hand.

Confusion compelled her to read.

Dear Mrs. Sinclair,

It is my painful duty to inform you of the death in action of one Frederick Sinclair, and it is with deep regret that we express to you our genuine sympathies for your loss.

Yours sincerely,

Harold Beresford, Officer in Charge

Beryl tried in vain to swallow the lump that formed in her throat.

No . . .

Trembling overtook her with such force that she slouched forward, tumbling off her painting stool and onto the hard, cold floor.

The pain that punched her hip was nothing in comparison to the sharp blade that seemed to slice straight through her heart.

Nausea flooded her.

Beryl banged her fists on the floor, her breaths rapid and shallow.

"No!"

He was dead?

Frederick was dead . . .

And with him, all hope for the future.

All opportunities for ever making amends.

Gone.

It was all gone with him.

Like Miss Jenkins.

Like Pearl. Her aunt, her parents.

Anyone to whom she had ever felt close — always, she lost them.

And now she had lost the closest one of them all.

As tears rushed down Beryl's cheeks, Mrs. Fortescue's words echoed in her mind.

' . . . if you allow all of the pain to ruin your chance at true love, I believe — I know — that the agony of doing so will be much greater than any that you have experienced thus far.'

It was true.

The terror of the accident, the pain of losing Miss Jenkins, of being separated from Pearl, even of discovering Frederick's involvement in what had happened to her . . .

None of it compared to this.

'It is my painful duty to inform you . . .'

Beryl gasped for breath through her wracking sobs, her mind picturing all the fleeting moments she had shared with Frederick, and all the ones she had hoped they might share upon his return.

‘...of the death in action of one Frederick Sinclair...’

Gone . . . How could he be gone?

She knew it now — she knew it.

She loved him.

Despite all the pain and torment his actions had inflicted upon them both.

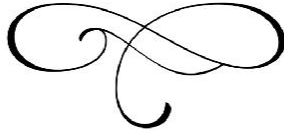
Despite not knowing how to even begin to rebuild the trust that had been broken.

Beryl’s shrieking scream of agony filled the room. “No!”

She loved Frederick.

She loved him.

And now he was gone.



FLOATING.

Was he floating?

Everything was black.

Slowly, sounds and sensations crept into his consciousness.

“Be—”

Was that his voice? It sounded so muffled.

Pain coursed through him.

More pain.

Breathing made it worse.

Quiet.

Everything was dark and quiet.

Ah!

The agony was burning now.

With each passing second, it grew more and more unbearable.

Beryl.

All he wanted was to see Beryl.

A hazy figure sat not too far from him.

Too big.

Too bulky.

It wasn't her.

“Oh . . .”

His moan sounded far away.

Could the pain get any worse?

Gritting his teeth, he tried to focus on the shadowy figure.

Fervent agony bore through him.

Darkness encircled him again, closing everything else out.



“OH, BERYL . . . I CANNOT BELIEVE IT,” Mrs. Fortescue's eyes gleamed with tears. She raised a delicate hand to her lips and shook her head.

Beryl sat on the floor of her painting room, staring at the legs of her easel, yet at nothing, too. A heavy numbness weighed her down, as though she were pinned to the ground.

She hadn't had the strength to move to the drawing room, so Swift

had escorted Mrs. Fortescue into her little room filled with art supplies and paintings in various stages of completion.

“Are they truly *certain*?” Mrs. Fortescue’s voice was soft and incredulous.

Beryl continued to stare ahead into nothingness.

Mrs. Fortescue, who had been kneeling beside her, turned and sat down properly on the floor next to her.

Silence filled the room.

A horrid, cruel silence.

Beryl’s mind and heart were blank after how intensely she had wept.

Only one word reverberated through them.

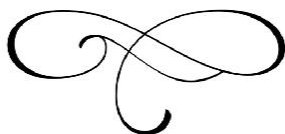
Why?

Why did she have to lose everyone to whom she’d ever grown close?

Why had God taken Frederick, after helping her to be willing to start again with their relationship?

And why could she not shake the idea that one day he *would* come home?

Why?



“I THINK he’s coming to, sir.”

The voice sounded quiet and dreamlike.

A rocking sensation grew ever more tangible.

As consciousness worked its way back into Frederick, so did the hot agony that burned through his chest and shoulder. The intensity of it made him gasp, bringing only further pain.

“I . . .”

“Do not try to speak. The surgeon has said you must rest.”
Surgeon?

An avalanche of memories poured back to him.

Reynolds, dead.

Paulson, trying to save the injured Stanley.

The jackets.

The enemy soldier approaching Paulson from behind.

Frederick trying to push Paulson out of the way.

Out of the way of . . .

The enemy’s pistol.

So, *that* was what the pain was.

He had been shot.

A chill swept over him and through him.

Wasn’t that what he’d been hoping for? Yet, God — in His mercy — had let him live.

Thus far, at least.

Oh, Lord, please do not let me die. Not without seeing Beryl again . . .

Each breath was a battle in itself now. Searing pain sliced through him as he inhaled, and a tight, sharp throb seized him with each exhale.

“Where . . . am . . .”

“You are seabound for Britain, along with the other soldiers who are too injured to remain and fight.”

Disbelief coursed through Frederick.

He was being sent home? To see Beryl?

Thank you, Lord! Please, help her to forgive me . . .

He wanted to weep with joy, but he was too exhausted and wracked with pain to do anything but try to endure the agony of each new breath.

“When?” Frederick asked, gritting his teeth immediately afterward in an involuntary response to the additional agony that speaking induced.

“You were injured ten days ago, and you have been in and out of consciousness since the surgeon saved your life. You were shot in the chest and shoulder at remarkably close range. Apparently, it is a miracle that you survived at all.”

Frederick thanked God again for sparing his life.

Yet, the ethereal voice had not answered Frederick’s intended question.

“No . . . home . . . when . . .”

“We are expected to reach England in the morning . . .”

The voice began to fade as exhaustion overtook Frederick, masking his awareness of the next words it uttered.

“ . . . Get some rest now, Mr. Stanley.”



“STILL NO WORD from the War Office?” asked Mrs. Fortescue, a worried crease on her brow.

“Nothing,” said Beryl, barely recognising her own voice. How hollow and empty it was.

Just like the rest of her.

She had written to the War Office at the repeated urging of Mrs. Fortescue to make certain that Frederick was really gone, and to inquire as to what might become of his belongings, and other customary formalities.

Beryl hadn’t wanted to write it, hadn’t wanted to make it all the more real by addressing any of it.

But she had. Somehow.

She couldn’t even remember what she had written.

Thankfully, Mrs. Fortescue had overseen it all.

“I understand how busy they must be, but surely they must know that loved ones need . . . closure,” said Mrs. Fortescue, lowering her volume for the last word.

Closure.

How could there ever be closure without a funeral? Without a body to lay to rest, and mourn?

Beryl closed her eyes, her insides screaming as she imagined what must have happened to Frederick’s body after dying in battle.

Had he been burned in a heap of other dead soldiers?

Or had he been left to rot right where he fell?

Tears pricked her reddened, stinging eyes. Was this what it had been like for Frederick? Helpless in the face of death, unable to make

amends or to shake off the guilt and regret that clung like an all-too-tight scarf around one's neck?

"When do his parents arrive?" asked Mrs. Fortescue, gently.

"In a day or so," said Beryl.

She had written to them, too, though how she had managed to form the hideous words on the page she still could not fathom.

They had responded quickly to inform her of their intention to set off at once for London. To be with her.

To *mourn* with her.

Beryl swallowed hard. She never thought it would come to this.

Even after reading Frederick's letter, how it seemed that he had almost expected never to return . . . She had been so convinced that he would.

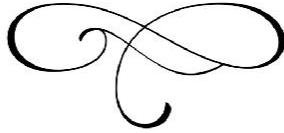
Even now, part of her still was.

"Perhaps I ought to have Mr. Fortescue send a message to Colonel Fitzherbert . . ."

Beryl tuned the rest of Mrs. Fortescue's words out and stared out of the window, silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

She closed her eyes, thinking again of Frederick and wondering if the anguish that now filled her was what had tormented him all these years.

So much regret, yet with no hope of ever absolving it.



FREDERICK SAT on the deck of the ship, salty air filling his nostrils with each painful breath. The sunlight bathed everything around him in a warm glow.

It reminded him of Beryl, of how the light would catch her fiery hair so that it shimmered and glistened with each little movement of her head.

Thank you, Lord . . .

He was really going home.

He was really going to see her again.

Unease nudged his stomach.

Would she *want* to see him again? Or would she rather he hadn't made it off the battlefield alive?

As he silently prayed for God's strength and help, a shadow fell across him.

Turning his head slowly, he glanced up.

Before him stood the man to whom the dreamlike voice had belonged, though now that Frederick had been awake long enough to hear it properly, it sounded completely different.

"Everything all right, sir?"

"Yes," croaked Frederick.

He wanted nothing more than to talk to Beryl when he returned, yet he had no idea how he would — each breath and word intensified the agony that consumed him even whilst he was doing nothing to provoke it.

"Can I fetch you anything?"

"No . . . thank you . . ." How could talking be so exhausting?

"Very well." The man turned to go.

"Oh . . . ? I am sorry . . . I have forgotten your name . . ."

"Hillman, sir."

"Hillman, yes. How . . . How many of us are there, here on the ship? The soldiers . . ." Frederick practically had to gasp between each word in his struggle to endure the pain.

Hillman looked sombre. "There are ten, sir. Quite a few are in perilous condition, yet. Truly, Mr. Stanley — the surgeon did say your survival was a miracle. I do not expect that some of the soldiers on board will even last for very long once they do arrive home."

"The surgeon's name . . . was Stanley?" Frederick asked. "I knew a Stanley . . ."

In his mind he saw Stanley's blood-soaked body, his legless stump, his pale, lifeless face. With injuries such as those, Frederick already knew what had become of the man.

Hillman frowned, eyeing Frederick with suspicious concern. "No . . . The surgeon was Dr. Bennett. *You* are Mr. Stanley."

Frederick gaped at Hillman, certain he had misheard him. "What?"

"Your name, sir. It is Edward Stanley," said Hillman, glancing around as though seeking to escape a madman.

Frederick grimaced, from pain and confusion. "I . . . am Frederick Sinclair."

It was Hillman's turn to gape. "What?"

"My name. It is . . . Frederick . . . Sinclair."

Hillman's eyes darted from side to side as he dipped his head, seemingly deep in thought.

"Are you sure, sir?" Hillman asked, looking back up.

"Entirely. Edward Stanley was a fellow soldier . . . and a friend. When I saw him last, he . . ." Frederick paused, sorrow cloaking him. "I do not believe that he left the battlefield alive."

All the colour drained from Hillman's face. He looked as though the slightest breeze might have knocked him over.

"Excuse me a moment, Mr. Sta—" He gulped. "Mr. Sinclair."

He dashed off, leaving Frederick to focus once again on the agonising task of trying to breathe through the pain.

How had they mistaken him for Stanley?

Frederick shook his head gently.

Poor Stanley. And Reynolds.

And what of Paulson? Even if he had managed to survive thus far, it seemed only a matter of time until each soldier's life was extinguished like a flame in the wind.

Aching gripped Frederick's heart, spreading out to his throat.

How glorious war seemed when viewed as a cause for justice and freedom, yet how futile it appeared when measured in the thousands of lives lost. Men with dreams, ambitions — with hopes. Men who would never return to their wife's embrace or their children's bedsides.

And how many women and children were left behind to mourn the husband and the father who would never again sit at the head of their dinner table, or enjoy a stroll in the country alongside them, or whisper their love to them just as they fell asleep?

How precious life was. How fragile.

"Excuse me."

Frederick glanced up at the older, heavy-set man approaching him.

Hillman soon appeared by the man's side.

"Hillman tells me that there may have been some error." It was clear from the man's expression that errors were not occurrences which he often had to address. "You are not Edward Stanley?"

"No, sir . . . My name is Frederick Sinclair."

The man blinked in surprise. "I see." He thought for a moment. "Sinclair, you say?"

"Yes."

"I am terribly sorry for the mistake, Mr. Sinclair. I assure you that we always strive for accuracy."

"There is no harm done, I suppose . . ."

Hillman and the heavy man exchanged a knowing look.

Frederick frowned. "What is it?"

"Hillman, explain while I fetch something, will you?"

The older man left without a backward glance, leaving a red-faced Hillman shifting his weight from foot to foot. He cleared his throat.

"I am afraid, Mr. Sinclair, that there has been a mix up."

Frederick almost opened his mouth to say that he could already see that, but he couldn't justify the pain it would have caused to voice any unnecessary words. Instead, he silently waited for the young, shame-faced man to continue.

"You see, sir, all of the families of . . . the deceased . . . are notified as soon as possible, and, well . . ."

Frederick's eyes widened as the implication of Hillman's words dawned on him. "You mean . . ."

Hillman reluctantly met his gaze.

"I am afraid that your wife has been notified that you were killed in action, Mr. . . . Mr. *Sinclair*."

Frederick squeezed his eyes shut.

So . . . Beryl believed him dead?

Worry flooded through Frederick as he pictured her reading the inaccurate letter.

Had the news been devastating to her, or a relief?

"I am dreadfully sorry, sir. We never imagined that our superiors had given us the wrong information." Hillman gulped, looking more ill at ease than a seasick stowaway. "It also means, of course, that we have failed to notify Mr. Stanley's wife. Be assured — we shall endeavour to correct the situation as soon as possible. Though, in your case, you will surely arrive home before the letter of correction would reach your wife."

"I see," Frederick said, stunned.

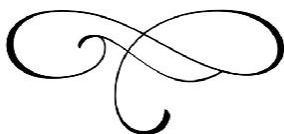
Despite the confusion of it all, at least he was now aware that his arrival home would be even more of a shock than he'd first thought.

The only question that remained was whether or not it would be a

pleasant one.

The heavy-set man returned, holding what looked like a piece of paper in his hand.

“This belongs to you, Mr. Sinclair. We were planning to return it to its sender, but now it seems that you shall be able to do so yourself.”



"AH, you finished the rose painting, I see," said Mrs. Fortescue gently, encouragement and approval audible in her tone.

Beryl nodded numbly. She didn't care a whit about the rose painting. Nor about any of the others that lay propped against the walls, half-finished and neglected.

"I do not even see how it matters." Beryl fixed a haunted gaze on her friend. "Eliza . . . how is anything to matter ever again?"

Mrs. Fortescue's eyebrows knit together. "In time, it will, I am sure." She smiled sympathetically, an expression Beryl had seen countless times during the past few weeks. "You are strong, Beryl. You have come through loss and calamity before, and I know that you can do so once again."

Beryl shook her head. "I am not strong." She closed her eyes, desperate to draw strength from the truth. "But God is."

"And He will help you, as He has helped you before."

Beryl nodded slowly. She sighed, questions and emotions colliding within her. "I do not know how to let go . . . There has been nothing final, nothing tangible. How can I let him go when . . . when it seems as though he is still merely away from home?"

Mrs. Fortescue almost clucked in sympathy. "I believe it will simply take time," she said slowly.

Beryl stilled, her attention shifting from her friend.

"Did you hear something?" she asked.

Mrs. Fortescue listened. "No . . . What was it like?"

Beryl shook her head, exhaling quickly. "It almost sounded like . . . like footsteps."

Mrs. Fortescue waved a dismissive hand. "I imagine it is only one of the servants, my dear."

Beryl listened intently. "No, it is a much heavier tread than any of theirs. Listen."

Mrs. Fortescue gave her a half-smile, half-grimace. "I cannot hear it, Beryl."

Beryl rubbed her forehead. Had her mind started playing tricks on her?

Suddenly, Mrs. Fortescue's expression of pity faded as her eyes began to widen. "Wait . . ."

Beryl held her breath. It *did* sound like footsteps.

Heavy, commanding footsteps.

The door handle began to turn.

Both ladies shrieked, and Mrs. Fortescue looked around frantically, snatching up a vase of flowers from a little side table. She raised it high in the air, her wide eyes transfixed on the door handle, her arms angled as though ready to hurl the vase at the mysterious intruder.

Beryl sat frozen on her stool, her heart racing as the door began to swing open.

“Oh!” Mrs. Fortescue exclaimed, dropping the vase. As it shattered, water and flowers swept out onto the floor.

Beryl slid off her stool, looking around for something she could use as a makeshift weapon.

“Beryl . . .”

The voice came from behind her.

And it wasn’t Mrs. Fortescue’s.

It sounded like. . .

It *couldn’t* be.

Slowly, Beryl turned around, blood rushing in her ears, her head light from breathing so little.

“Frederick?” she gasped.

He stood before her, a bruise on one side of his forehead and his right arm in a sling. His eyes sparkled with anticipation, his brows slightly raised.

His lips were parted in a gentle smile.

Frederick strode toward her, taking one of her hands in his uninjured one.

“I have come home to you, as you asked,” he smiled. Hope glimmered in his eyes, along with something else. Something that made Beryl’s breath catch in her throat.

She stared at him, disbelief freezing her to the spot.

Tears filled Beryl’s eyes. “They said . . . They said you—”

Her face crumpled with emotion as she squeezed his hand, astonished that he was really present.

Really . . . *alive*.

Compassion altered Frederick’s countenance. “There was a dreadful mix-up. They somehow had me confused with Edward Stanley. It was *his* wife who should have received the letter — not you.”

Mrs. Fortescue bumbled awkwardly to the door, casting a sideways glance at the watery mess of flowers on the floor. “I am dreadfully sorry . . . I shall leave the two of you in peace. I shall call again in a day or two,” she said with a nod, all politeness and decorum.

As she reached the doorway, she turned and looked squarely at

them. "I am so thrilled for you both!" she said, almost in a squeal.

Her expression grew serious. "Cherish one another. Let the past remain where it is. Look to your future and embrace it. For you almost did not have one."

With a somewhat wistful smile she slipped out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Tears spilled onto Beryl's cheeks as she stared up at Frederick. "You are really here!"

She closed her eyes, burying her face in his chest, relishing his scent and warmth.

His strong left arm closed around her as he pulled her closer, kissing the top of her head. "I am here," he said, almost in a whisper.

She moved back, looking again at his face.

He *was* alive. Part of her had known it, somehow.

Part of her had screamed at herself not to let go.

"You are injured?" she asked, lightly touching the gaping fabric of his sling.

"I was shot."

Beryl gasped. "Shot?"

Frederick nodded grimly. "Apparently, the surgeon said it was a miracle that I survived. I was unconscious for days."

Beryl's chin trembled. How close she had truly come to losing him.

The accident, the tension that had stretched between them — none of it mattered now.

Frederick was safe. He was home.

Mrs. Fortescue was right — the past had no place in their future.

"Speaking of miracles," said Frederick, "I received your letter on the boat as I was being brought back to England. I . . . I cannot begin to . . ."

He winced, the effort of speaking still aggravating his wounds. "Do you mean it — you truly *forgive* me?"

Beryl looked deep into his eyes. Something was different about them. Perhaps it was gratitude that he had survived, or the promise of hope that her letter had given to him.

"Yes," she said. She meant every word of it, even more now than when she had first written it.

The corners of Frederick's eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Your prayer was answered, too."

"Yes. God did watch over you, and He brought you home safely." Beryl closed her eyes in relief, offering a silent prayer of gratitude as the reality of it all began to sink in.

"Ah, yes. That is right. I . . . was referring to your other prayer, though." Frederick almost looked as though he were battling to conceal a grin.

Beryl frowned in confusion. "My other prayer?"

"For my forgiveness. From God."

Beryl's eyes widened. "You mean—"

"Yes. God has forgiven me, Beryl — foul wretch that I am, He has forgiven me!" His countenance was the very picture of amazed relief.

"Oh, Frederick!" Beryl embraced him again, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Thank you, God, she prayed silently. Thank you for bringing my husband home, and for saving him. Please, Lord, help us to move forward together in hope and joy, after so many years of sorrow.

Beryl looked up at Frederick, the hope in his eyes mirrored in her own. "I am so glad that you are safe. That you are alive."

His eyes shone with peace and love. "And I am so glad that you *wanted* me to come back. And that God has given us a new chapter of life. Together."

They held each other's gazes, their faces awash with tears and smiles.

Frederick leaned down toward her. As Beryl closed her eyes, she tingled all over at the touch of his lips against hers.

He moved his head back, looking intently at her. "I love you, Beryl."

"Oh, Frederick . . . I love you!"

Their lips met again, and Beryl sank into Frederick's kiss, into his embrace.

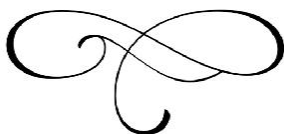
Though the pain of the past still echoed within her, she knew that what God's word said was true.

He had proven it time and again to each of them — His grace truly would be sufficient for all of their needs.

Frederick was right. God had given them a fresh start.

A new chapter of life. Together.

And as they traversed it with God's help, He would restore and renew all the broken places of their hearts.



FREDERICK FINISHED AFFIXING his cufflinks and turned to face his wife. "Are you ready, my love?"

"Yes . . . How do I look?"

Frederick stared at Beryl, her flame-coloured hair shimmering and her dark green dress flattering her newly regained figure.

"Breathtaking," he said with a smile. "And you are certain that you are well enough to attend tonight, especially in light of my parents arriving tomorrow?"

"Yes, I am sure," she said with a smile.

Beryl thought for a moment of the last time Frederick's parents had visited, a little over a year ago. It had not been a grim, mournful stay after all, but had turned into a celebration that their son was alive.

All four of them had also shared a time of healing and gratitude after Frederick had finally told his parents the full extent of what had happened five years earlier.

Beryl and his parents had all rejoiced to hear how God had set Frederick free from his guilt and anguish. And Frederick's father and mother had responded to everything with such gentle understanding that Beryl had begun to feel a deepening bond with both of them — stronger than any she'd felt with her own relatives.

Frederick's voice distracted Beryl from her reflections. "Shall we go, then?"

Beryl smoothed her gown and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "It has been so long since I have been out among a crowd," she mused.

Frederick gave a short laugh. "Well, there is no need to be nervous." His eyes twinkled. "You shall make me the envy of every man in the room."

Beryl smiled, remembering the first time Frederick had said that. "And I shall be the envy of every lady," she chimed happily, just as she had replied the year they'd first been married.

He leaned down and pressed his lips against hers. Time seemed to disappear as Beryl relaxed in Frederick's embrace.

He straightened up and his smile warmed her heart.

"Come, we shall be late," he said. His warm eyes gazed at her, almost apologetically.

They descended the stairs, Frederick assisting Beryl lovingly as he had done right from the start.

“Oh, you look lovely, ma’am,” said one of the servants, passing them in the hallway with a blanket. She stopped to appraise her mistress. “You look as fresh as a daisy!”

“Thank you, Hannah,” Beryl said with a smile. She certainly didn’t feel as fresh as one. She stifled a yawn, still weary from the broken sleep that had been her new normality these past few months.

Beryl looked coyly at Frederick, biting her lower lip. “I must say goodbye once again.”

Frederick gave a knowing smile and leaned down, kissing her forehead. “As must I.”

They walked hand in hand to the drawing room, where Hannah had placed the blanket and was arranging a change of clothes.

“Goodnight, my dear little Amelia,” said Frederick, scooping their daughter up in his left arm. His right arm had healed, though without fully regaining its prior range of motion.

“She is so precious,” said Beryl, dreamily, before planting a gentle kiss on the baby’s head.

“Just like her mamma,” said Frederick with a smile.

Beryl looked up at her husband. “We have been so blessed,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, we have. Every day I thank God for His grace, and for you, and now for little Amelia.”

“As do I.” Beryl nestled her head against Frederick’s chest and wiggled her finger into Amelia’s soft grip. She sighed in contentment, thanking God for giving each of them the strength they needed, and trusting that He would continue to care for them moving forward.

“Have a pleasant evening, both of you,” said Hannah, after they’d settled Amelia back in the nursemaid’s arms.

“Thank you. We shall,” said Frederick, smiling at Beryl.

Though her heart ached to leave her baby for the first time, Beryl knew that the evening would indeed be pleasant with Frederick by her side.

As would every new day God blessed them with.
Together.

What Did You Think?

I really hope you enjoyed reading this novel
as much as I enjoyed writing it for you.

If you did, please consider leaving a rating and/or review
on Amazon or Goodreads.

A review doesn't have to be a long, in-depth critique - just a line or
two about what you liked about the book would make my day and
help other readers find my stories.

Reviews really are so helpful and encouraging for authors, and your
feedback on *Beryl's Blessing* - no matter how short - would be so very
much appreciated.

Thank you in advance!

Reading Group Resources

Want to read *Beryl's Blessing* with your book group?



Get free downloadable questions and goodies at
EdwinaKiernan.com/reading

Acknowledgments

This novel would not be what it is without the spectacular help I received from the following brilliant people:

Jenny Proctor at Midnight Owl Editors -

Thank you for your editing, encouragement and honesty. Your comments and suggestions never fail to polish my prose, and I love our Zoom chats! Thank you for all of your work on this series, and may your time off to focus on your own writing be more of a blessing than you can imagine!

Hannah Linder at Hannah Linder Designs -

Thank you again for your patience, prompt responses and stellar work. Your professionalism and skills are greatly appreciated, as is your passion for glorifying God through Christian publishing.

Rachel Knowles and Philippa Jane Keyworth -

a.k.a. The K Team! Thank you both so much for your laughter, encouragement, openness and advice. I love our monthly meet-ups and cannot wait to see our series project come to life! Rachel, thank you so much for your historical edit and for catching typos that I'd missed! And Pip, thank you so much for your research skills, your honesty and your exuberance. I love you both, and am so glad we share a friendship and a desire to glorify God with our writing.

And a huge, special thank you to:

My husband, Paul, and son, Luke -

I could fill a whole book with words trying to explain how grateful I am for both of you and I still wouldn't be able to express it enough!

Thank you both for your love, prayers, encouragement, kindness, laughter, crazy faces, and for all the fun we get to have as a happy little family.

God has blessed me beyond my wildest dreams to be your wife, Paul, and your mama, Luke. I am so honoured, grateful and blessed each time I think of you both, and I can never thank God enough for putting the three of us together.

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you" (Philippians 1:3)

About the Author

Edwina Kiernan is the Christian author of the award-winning novel, *Ruby's Redemption*.

An enthusiast of classic novels and history, Edwina combines her faith, imagination and research to create hope-infused tales set in times past.

A lifelong word admirer, with Welsh and Irish heritage, she started writing stories early in childhood. She still loves to learn, taking courses from places like Oxford University and the Beau Monde, for both fun and further education.

When she's not writing, Edwina loves spending time with her dashing husband and lively little son, reading and studying the Bible, getting lost in a captivating, classic novel and drinking more types of tea than most people realise even exist.

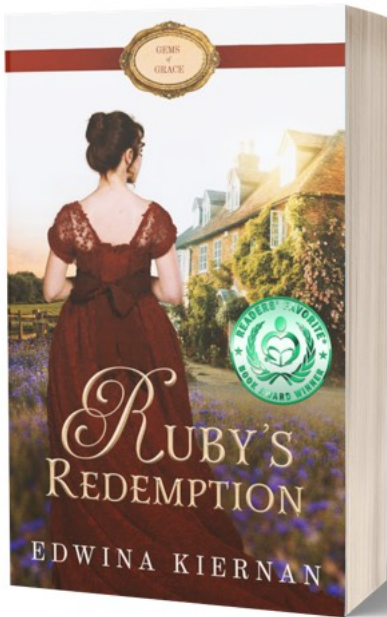
Join her mailing list for free gifts, exclusive regular giveaways, book updates and lots of classic and Christian historical fiction goodness.

Subscribe at EdwinaKiernan.com

RUBY'S REDEMPTION

**2021 Readers' Favourite Award Winner
In Christian Historical Romance**

Book 1 in the Gems of Grace series



A gentle clergyman. A broken prostitute.

A blossoming love that will endanger both their lives...

Forced into depravity by her tyrannous guardian after her parents' death, Ruby's life is one of vile deeds and violence. Unable to remember much of life outside the brothel's walls, years of despair and abuse have crushed all hope of ever breaking free from her captor's iron grip.

Until an unlikely encounter with Henry, a gentle country clergyman, sets an escape in motion that will change both their lives. But when Ruby's worst fears are realised, the uncommon pair will face more devastation than either thought possible.

As the dawning of a new life of peace and love is ripped from her grasp, Ruby discovers that true freedom has a high cost... but who will have to pay?

Available in Paperback, eBook and Kindle Unlimited

PEARL'S PROMISE

Book 2 in the Gems of Grace series



A duty-bound heir. A dejected spinster. An encounter that could ruin both their families' demands for their futures...

Pearl Acton's worst fears are coming true. She'll be trapped in a loveless marriage—just like her parents—as her family seeks to quickly marry her off to the wealthy Mr. Clarence. Until an encounter with a quiet and soulful heir sparks a fragile hope that somehow Pearl might aid her family *and* marry for love.

Nicholas Dalton has always been a disappointment to his father, with his poetic soul and disorganised nature. In London for the season, Nicholas finds an instant connection with the lovely Pearl Acton, but it would seem her future is promised to another. Or might she feel the same as he?

As Pearl and Nicholas each strive to uphold their family duties, they soon discover that things aren't quite what they seem. Is it too late to escape their crushing obligations and forge a new path - together?

Available in Paperback, eBook and Kindle Unlimited at

EdwinaKiernan.com/PearlsPromise

Coming Soon

New Series!

Love Christian historical fiction?

You'll love Edwina Kiernan's brand new Victorian era series!



Pre-order the first book - ***The Letter*** - here:

[**https://edwinakiernan.com/preorder**](https://edwinakiernan.com/preorder)



Subscribe at [**EdwinaKiernan.com**](https://edwinakiernan.com) for updates!

WANT TO BE FIRST TO GET MY NEXT BOOK?

My author newsletter
gives you all the latest
updates - plus freebies,
book recommendations,
exciting treats *and more...*

Subscribe now:

EdwinaKiernan.com